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Extending the Conference Through BlogTracks: Reflections from the First Year of a New Presentation Format

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REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIRST YEAR OF A NEW PRESENTATION FORMAT

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Abstract

The recently concluded annual convention for the Association for Educational Communications and Technology added a new presentation format: the BlogTrack. These were groups of bloggers who conducted their presentation through blogs in the weeks leading up to the convention, as well as during the convention. Because this was the inaugural year for the BlogTrack format, there were some inevitable growing pains. In this article, we discuss the purpose for the BlogTrack, summarize the two BlogTrack presentations offered this year, and reflect on the process while offering suggestions for more effective BlogTrack presentations in the future.

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Purpose and Rationale for the BlogTracks

One of the criticisms that has been raised by members about the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) is that the organization has become simply an annual convention and a subscription to *TechTrends*. For those who are unable to attend the annual convention, half of their perceived membership benefits are not realized. While we think there is more to AECT than these two elements, this past year the convention planners attempted to address the issue of those who are unable to attend the annual convention by bringing the convention to them. As you may have noticed during your time in Dallas, there were numerous individuals responsible for recording sessions that will eventually be available as podcasts so that those who did not have the ability to be with us in Dallas would still be able to access the content of those sessions.

In addition to the podcasting efforts, the convention planers proposed an alternative presentation format that would allow those not attending, as well as those attending the convention, to become engaged in an extended conversation through blogging. Two of these alternate presentation formats, or BlogTracks, were accepted for the 2006 annual convention with the intention that the BlogTrack presenters would begin their blogging approximately a month to a month and a half prior to the convention, continue that participation during the conference, and then near the end of the convention have a face-to-face presentation to summarize the conversation that had occurred.

Summary of the Two BlogTrack Sessions

The first BlogTrack was titled, "Emerging Trends in the Research on Online Learning Environments," and was comprised of a group of students and one professor at the University of Georgia who participated in a research group about online learning. Each member of the group had a unique focus, with members examining different aspects of the literature on distance learning related to virtual schooling, online social interaction, corporate distance learning, online higher education, and other issues and trends. Two members of this group began blogging early, around April, while the others joined the conversation in the middle to late summer. The participants posted summaries of literature articles they had found through the Internet and traditional paper-based journals, insights they had gained from conducting their own research related to their specific topics, and questions about the literature and implications for future studies. All of this was done in an effort to start conversations. However, there was only minimal outside participation through comments left on the blogs. In preparation for the AECT convention, each member of this team summarized their findings from reviewing the literature on their topic, offered a few final conclusions and recommendations for future research, and reflected on the effectiveness of the BlogTracks format. These final summaries were presented in the face-to-face presentation at the convention.

The second BlogTrack was titled, "Blog Trek: The Next Generation." Participants for this BlogTrack were recruited through a posting on the Division of Distance Learning listserv. The purpose for this BlogTrack was to organize a group of bloggers who would document their journey from university-owned Internet domains to establishing their own online professional presence on an independent server and domain. Ultimately, several of the original members of

this team declined to participate and only four continued. All of these ran into technical or other

challenges that kept them from fully creating their online sites before the convention began, and

thus this BlogTrack struggled to really get much blogging underway before the convention.

<center>*Reflections on the BlogTracks Format*</center>

We feel that the BlogTracks format is still in its infancy, and struggled through some of

the growing pains that are to be expected with any new, substantial change in the format for

professional presentations. However, we have a few suggestions that we think will enable future

BlogTracks sessions to be more successful. These suggestions fall under three categories: format

and structure of the BlogTracks, blogging suggestions, and AECT community support.

Format and Structure of the BlogTracks

One of the greatest difficulties with this new presentation format was deciding how to

cater to any one or more of the multiple purposes that the BlogTracks could serve. Were these

presentations intended to get people talking prior to the convention as a way to increase

enthusiasm among members about the convention? Were these presentations supposed to involve

more people, particularly those unable to attend the convention, in a kind of an outreach project?

Were the BlogTracks designed to keep the conversation developing even after everyone had

returned home from the convention? Or was it a combination of any of these purposes?

Which of these purposes the BlogTracks were trying to, or should try to, serve, would

have profound impacts on the structure and format of these presentations. For example, if the

BlogTracks are a pre-conference conversation, then how far in advance of the convention should

they begin? How frequent should the postings be, and should that change as the convention gets

closer? Or if these presentations are simply an extension of the podcasting efforts, should there

even be pre-convention blogging? Should the participants only blog during the convention, but

do so with a great deal of depth to provide a window into the event for those who are unable to physically be there? These are the types of questions that the participants of these two experimental BlogTracks faced and failed to answer in a coherent and successful manner. It seems that in the future, having clearly defined goals for the BlogTrack presentations will help focus the blogging, as well as help AECT members understand what the BlogTracks are about and how they can participate. In addition, we feel that having a BlogTrack topic that is more discussion-based, rather than solely being a personal narrative or journal, may help encourage participation from other AECT members.

Blogging Suggestions

There are many different styles of blogs on the Internet, so one challenge we faced was understanding what kind of blogging would create the most effective BlogTrack presentation. We feel that through our experiences we have gained a few insights that may help future BlogTrack bloggers, if the format is continued at future conventions. First, it is important to have a large enough blogging team to sustain a conversation, especially because the weeks immediately leading up to the convention are typically very busy. As blogging can be time-consuming, the BlogTracks especially should be intrinsically motivating and focused around a topic relevant to the presenter's research, so that the blogging is not time wasted. For example, our BlogTrack blogs in the "Emerging Trends" BlogTrack were related to our individual research interests, so even when there was not a lot of feedback given through comments, we still benefited from the writing experience. Our "Blog Trek" blogs were not directly related to our personal research agendas, and it was consequently much harder to devote time to developing those blogs.

Because the strength of blogging is that it is not tied to a particular location or community, we feel that the BlogTracks could also be more successful if they brought in nontraditional conference participants (e.g., half of the bloggers for the Emerging Trends team did not attend the convention this year). It might be especially interesting if a BlogTrack team was created that included ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) or AACE (Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education) members, since they may not be part of the AECT community, but are still involved in similar research areas. This might provide fresh insights. Finally, while at the conference, we feel it would be beneficial to blog about sessions at the convention related to your BlogTrack topic, and that the bloggers would benefit from using other media such as pictures and podcasts to thicken their descriptions of what is being discussed at the convention.

AECT Community Support

Because the BlogTracks are a new presentation format, there will inevitably be growing pains if AECT chooses to continue offering the format at future conventions. Because of this, it will be critical for AECT to do what it can to support the awareness and development of this format. We feel that there a few strategies that AECT can employ to make future BlogTrack sessions more successful. First, begin publicizing the BlogTracks early, frequently, and visibly on AECT newsletters, official websites, and in pre-convention issues of *TechTrends*. We found that a main challenge this year was that members were simply not aware of the BlogTrack blogs or presentations. After we posted our BlogTrack URLs on the listserv for the division of distance learning, the first question from a division member asked what the BlogTracks were, and others agreed that they also were not aware of this new presentation format or how it would work. At the face-to-face presentation in Dallas, some members commented that they had never

participated in blog conversations before and did not know how to engage in the discussion. So perhaps AECT can provide visible links to resources where members can learn what the BlogTracks are and a step-by-step guide in how to participate.

At the convention, we feel that it would be most effective to have the BlogTracks' face-to-face presentations at the end of the week, so that they can serve as powerful "wrap-up" sessions, summarizing the trends and themes from the convention. Also, closer integration between the convention newsletter, podcasting services, and the BlogTracks—perhaps by using a common website to link out to all of these resources—might increase visibility for all of these individual projects.

Finally, we wonder whether it might be useful to have BlogTrack presentations "hosted" by individual divisions. The divisions could create a Call For BlogTrack Proposal that is unique, review the proposals, and then select the proposal that best represents the division. Then the division could ask some of its members—perhaps its board members—to help the BlogTracks thrive, since it would benefit the visibility of the entire division. The division's communications officer could create publicity for the BlogTracks, the division board might recommend special sessions at the convention for the bloggers to attend, and the board members-at-large might post frequent feedback or comments on the blogs until other members engage in the conversation.

<center>*Conclusions*</center>

While there was not very much participation this year in the BlogTracks' discussions through feedback, comments, or trackbacks, there was a large number of attendees to the BlogTracks' face-to-face session, indicating that there was at least a sizable level of interest. Because of this, we do not feel that the BlogTracks idea should be abandoned. We believe that the Internet provides the potential to allow many new types of participation and discourse, and

we applaud AECT for trying a new presentation format this year that would capitalize on new

technologies. We hope that the association will not give up on its attempts to connect members

more effectively before, during, and after the annual convention. We feel that blog-style

presentations might be part of this strategy, and we hope that our reflections from participating in

this years' BlogTracks may help future efforts to develop this presentation format.