



**THE ACCEPTANCE OF VIRTUAL PRESENTATIONS  
AT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES ON EDUCATION**

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**Abstract:** International academic conferences represent one manifestation of globalisation. At these conferences, academics come together to exchange ideas and experiences and to make contacts. Education is one of many academic fields on which a wide range of international conferences take place. Unfortunately, many people fly to such conferences, just contributing to climate change and other forms of ecological damage. This article focuses on the use of ICT for virtual presentations at these conferences, one way to enjoy the benefits of global interchange while lessening damage to the environment. Virtual presentations can be defined as presentations where the presenters do not attend the conference in person but instead do their presentations asynchronously or synchronously by electronic means. Thus, via virtual presentations, academics share and interact without travelling to the conference venue. This article has three parts. The first part explains ideas for doing virtual presentations. The second part of the article presents a study of conference organisers' reactions to virtual presentations at international conferences on education. The third part discusses pros and cons of virtual presentations.

**Keywords:** Virtual presentations; climate change; international conferences; presentations via distance; environmental activism.

**Resumo:** Encontros acadêmicos internacionais são uma das manifestações da globalização. Neles os acadêmicos se encontram para trocar ideias e experiências e para estabelecer contatos. A educação é uma das áreas acadêmicas sobre as quais há uma grande quantidade de encontros internacionais. Infelizmente, muitas pessoas voam para esses encontros contribuindo assim para a mudança climática e outras formas de danos ecológicos. Este artigo trata do uso de ICT (*information and communication technology*) em apresentações virtuais nesses encontros, um modo de usufruir os benefícios das interações globais ao mesmo tempo que em que evita aumentar os danos ao meio ambiente. Apresentações virtuais podem ser definidas como aquelas em que os apresentadores não comparecem pessoalmente, mas, ao contrário, apresentam seu trabalho assincronicamente ou sincronicamente por meios eletrônicos. Assim, fazendo sua apresentação virtualmente, os acadêmicos compartilham ideias e interagem sem viajar para o local do encontro. Este artigo consta de três partes. A primeira faz sugestões para fazer apresentações virtuais. A segunda apresenta um estudo das reações dos

organizadores dos encontros a apresentações virtuais em encontros internacionais sobre educação. A terceira discute as vantagens e desvantagens das apresentações virtuais.

**Palavras-chave:** Apresentações virtuais; mudança climática; congressos internacionais; apresentações à distância; ativismo ambiental.

### **Introduction**

Observers have long noted that we live in an increasingly globalised world (LINDAHL, OBAKI, & ZHANG, 2003), a world in which people interact with others around the globe to exchange ideas, information, products, etc. Developments in information and communication technology (ICT), such as smart phones, social networks and the internet, have boosted globalisation (ARDALAN, 2011) by providing new means of interaction with people in other countries. Indeed, ICT has greatly facilitated people's ability to interact without travel. For instance, people thousands of kilometres apart can easily, cheaply and synchronously communicate via ICT tools.

International academic conferences represent one manifestation of globalisation. At these conferences, academics come together to exchange ideas and experiences and to make contacts. Education is one of many academic fields on which a wide range of international conferences take place. Such conferences often involve air travel, as conference participants travel long distances to attend. Unfortunately, air travel constitutes an important cause of human produced environmental damage, e.g., Clark (2010) estimated that in the United Kingdom, air travel account for about 14% of that country's greenhouse gas emissions.

This article focuses on the use of ICT for virtual presentations at these conferences. Virtual presentations can be defined as presentations where the presenters do not attend the conference in person but instead do their presentations asynchronously or synchronously by electronic means. Thus, via virtual presentations, academics share and interact without travelling to the conference venue. This article has three parts. The first part explains ideas for doing virtual presentations. The second part of the article presents a study of conference organisers' reactions to virtual presentations at international conferences on education. The third part discusses pros and cons of virtual presentations.

### **Ideas for Doing Virtual Presentations**

This section of the paper offers ideas on doing virtual presentations. As new technologies are created and popularised, no doubt the formats discussed here will change or become outdated. Before beginning this discussion of formats for virtual presentations, it should be acknowledged that even before ICT, including video, became popular, presentations were done by absentee presenters who, for whatever reason, elected not to attend a conference and asked colleagues or the conference organisers to read their papers or display their poster presentations for them.

### **Formats for Virtual Presentations**

Many formats exist for virtual presentations. Asynchronous virtual presentations can be prepared for conferences by several overlapping means. Videos offer one possible format. Another format involves PowerPoint and other slide show software that allow presenters to narrate each slide. Software such as Camtasia (TechSmith, 2015) can combine video with slide shows. Also, virtual presenters can appear live, i.e., synchronously, via an expanding range of technology options (GOOD, 2014). One combination format used by the authors of this article has been to prepare their presentation in advance for asynchronous viewing at their scheduled conference session and then to do the post-presentation question and answer synchronously.

Virtual presentations can be used for many different types of conference sessions, including plenaries, paper presentations, panel sessions and poster sessions. Perhaps, looping video can be used for the latter. Workshops might even be facilitated via synchronous communication. Furthermore, sessions such as paper presentations can have a workshop element by such means as pausing the presentations for interaction among participants.

Virtual presenters need cooperators at the conference. Perhaps, the ideal is when the cooperators co-author the presentation with the virtual presenters. In that way, the cooperators are well versed in the topic, in case questions arise or something goes wrong with the technology and some adlibbing is required to rescue the presentation from possible 'death by technology'. If co-authors presenting is not a viable option, the actual presenting of virtual presentation can be entrusted either to colleagues who are attending the conference in person or to conference staff, such as education students at a university near the conference venue. In either case, the cooperators need to be briefed about what the presenters have in mind, for instance, if presenters wish to intersperse group activities

(groups include twosomes), cooperators need to understand how to facilitate these activities.

### **Promoting Interaction via Virtual Presentations**

The current section of this paper offers ideas for promoting interaction among participants as part of virtual presentations. A prime rationale for holding conferences in education and other fields is to promote interaction among in-service and pre-service professionals. This interaction can take place inside or outside of conference sessions.

**Interaction inside sessions.** Although the literature on education (e.g., IBÁÑEZ, GARCÍA RUEDA, MAROTO, & KLOOS, 2013; JOHNSON, JOHNSON, & STANNE, 2000; KYNDT, RAES, LISMONT, TIMMERS, DOCHY, & CASCALLAR, 2013; SLAVIN, 1991) seems to support the value of interaction among students, it is the experience of the authors of this article that many conference presenters, both in-person and virtual presenters, restrict their sessions to one-way communication from the presenters to the session participants, with the exception of Q&A time. Furthermore, some presenters make a unilateral decision to sacrifice Q&A time in order to share more content with their audiences. This decision may seem justifiable, because when time is permitted for audience input, it is not unusual for there to be little input from the floor. Similarly, when conference presenters allocate time in their sessions for interaction among participants, many participants may hold back from engaging in such interactions. Careful planning can make interaction among participants more likely and effective. Here are several suggestions based in part on the literature on cooperative learning. Most of these suggestions are relevant to both in-person and virtual presentations.

1. It should be made clear in the conference program that interaction among the audience is planned for the session. Thus, people who would rather not interact can opt to attend other sessions.
2. The session can start with the presenters asking the audience to form pairs and then asking the just formed pairs to introduce themselves to each other. Doing tongue twisters is another way to break the ice.
3. Pauses can be inserted at various points in the presentations, and the pairs can be given questions to answer or tasks to do, such as sharing their experiences

on the topic of the presentations, giving their opinions on points made by the presenters or reflecting on how ideas from the presentations have been or could be applied to the audience's own work. The pausing can be built into virtual presentations, e.g., by inserting two minutes of empty time in a video, or by the on-site person in charge of the presentation pausing the video or waiting before moving to the next slide in the presentation.

4. To strive for fairly equal participation among the members of the pairs, presenters might want to designate a particular amount of time for each person to speak or to ask participants to write first before they share with their partner, in order to help more reflective participants prepare what they might wish to share.

**Interaction outside of virtual presentations.** Building their professional networks represents an important reason for academics to attend conferences in education. Of course, nowadays, ICT offers many alternative ways of boosting professional networks, such as via Linked-in and via Facebook groups, e.g., Teachers Voices (RENANDYA, 2015). Ways to use virtual presentations as network building tools include:

1. Virtual presentations can be posted online ahead of, not just during and after, conferences. Pre-conference posting of presentations enables interaction to take place even before the official time slot for the presentations.
2. Presenters can include multiple online means by which they can be contacted.
3. Tools, such as chat and polling, can be used for presenters to communicate with their audiences during the presentation, and session participants can also use chat and other tools to communicate with each other.

## **The Study**

This part of the paper explains the aims, procedure, materials and results of a study of the receptiveness towards virtual presentations of organisers of international conferences on education.

## **Aims**

The researchers who conducted this study had two aims. First, the researchers wanted to gather and disseminate information about the current state of play as to virtual presentations at international conferences on education. International conferences were chosen because those might be the conferences for which more academics would wish to do virtual presentations, given the greater distances presenters would have to travel compared to national and local conferences. ‘International’ was a bit difficult to define, because a conference with just one person from another country could be considered international. The researchers based inclusion in this category on whether the conference seemed to be seeking participants from other countries, rather than only having invited speakers from other countries. Education conferences were chosen because those are the conferences with which the researchers have experience.

The second aim of the research was to encourage more and better virtual presentations at education conferences. The researchers hoped to achieve this aim by raising the issue of virtual presentations with conference organisers and publishing the study’s results, along with ideas for how to do virtual presentations. The research questions asked in the study were:

- (1) Did conference organisers allow virtual presentations?  
If such presentations were allowed,
- (2) Were there any specifications as to the types of virtual presentations, e.g., were only asynchronous presentations allowed?
- (3) What percentage of standard conference registration fees did virtual presenters have to pay?
- (4) What were the concerns of conference organisers who did not allow virtual presentations?

### **Procedure and Materials**

In 2015, the researchers used the Google search engine to locate international conferences on education that had been held or were to be held that year. Conferences on the area of education were chosen, as education is the main area of the authors’ academic work. The names of conferences obtained thereby were supplemented by conferences identified by the researchers based on their experience as presenters or as non-presenting participants at international conferences on education. In this manner, 77 international conferences on education were identified. The researchers were able to answer the research questions

based on a perusal of the websites of 11 of the 77 selected conferences. To obtain the necessary information for the other 66 conferences, the researchers emailed the conference organisers, using email addresses obtained from the conference websites or the contact forms on those websites. When no response was received, a follow-up email was sent a month later. Eventually, organisers of 41 conferences responded, for a response rate of 62%. Additionally, to gain insight into why virtual presentations were not permitted, the researchers contacted the organisers of 38 conferences that had indicated that they did not allow virtual presentations. Sixteen replied, for a response rate of 42%.

## **Results**

The researchers investigated the policy towards permitting virtual presentations of 77 international conferences on education. Data were obtained for 52 of these conferences. The first research question asked if conferences allow virtual presentations. Of the 52 conferences investigated, 73% ( $n= 38$ ) did not allow virtual presentations, and 26% ( $n= 14$ ) allowed virtual presentations. The second research question asked about the types of virtual presentations allowed. Of the 14 conferences that allowed virtual presentations, data were obtained for 10 of those conferences. Of these, only two conferences allowed video conferencing, such as Skype and WebEx, while most of the conferences ( $n= 8$ ) preferred asynchronous media such as pre-recorded PowerPoint slides, authorSTREAM and Youtube. Additionally, some conferences proposed a combination of asynchronous presentations and real-time telecommunication software to conduct post-presentation discussion.

The third research question asked what percentage of the standard registration fees did virtual presenters have to pay. Data for this question were found for all 14 of the conferences that permitted virtual presentations. Of these, virtual presenters had to pay the full fees as all but two of the conferences. The fourth question asked about concerns of conference organisers who did not allow virtual presentations. A total of 16 conferences provided data on this question. Their concerns are displayed in Table 1. [Note: the organisers of some conferences listed multiple concerns.]

[please place Table 1 about here]

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

**This section of this paper explores the pros and cons of virtual presentations, based on respondents' views, as well as the researchers own experiences with virtual**

**presentations. Additionally, suggestions are made about the future of virtual presentations.**

### **Possible Benefits of Virtual Presentations**

This section of the article explains possible benefits of virtual presentations at international conferences on education. The examples that illustrate these possible benefits are based on the authors' experiences in organising and participating in education conferences, and in education generally.

1. Virtual presentations fit well with current trends towards online learning. For example, in flipped classroom methods (Center for Teaching + Learning, n.d.), students might watch lectures before class via such learning tools as TED Talks, Crash Course and teacher-made videos. Also, online courses offered by universities and other institutions often features virtual presentations.
2. Preparing virtual presentations pushes presenters to learn IT tools and to master new features of tools the presenters already know. For instance, in addition to updates of PowerPoint, perhaps the most common presentation software, competitors to PowerPoint, such as Prezi, offer new presenters potentially more effective ways to share their ideas.
3. Presenters are not the only ones being pushed by virtual presentations. Institutions that host international conferences on education need to have new hardware and software both to produce virtual presentations for their staff and to be able to host conferences. Furthermore, conference organisers need to upgrade their skills in order to meet the needs of virtual presenters.
4. Virtual presentations can save money both for conference organisers and for participants. Organisers save on cost of bringing and housing invited speakers, for whom many conference provide airfare and accommodation. Ordinary presenters who present virtually save on transportation, accommodation and conference registration fees (although the research reported above indicated that most conferences charge a reduced registration fee to virtual presenters). Furthermore, those presenters who work for education institutions on a contract basis, rather than for a salary, e.g., part-time lecturers at a university, do not have to give up paid work when they present virtually. As one academic (MILLINER, personal communication) wrote to the researchers, 'Given the unfortunate trend of



universities hiring more teachers part-time, virtual presentations provide a cost-efficient and effective way for academics to grow their skills and develop their CV’.

5. Some presenters may have difficulty travelling due to health reasons. For instance, one 95-year-old presenter videotaped a talk at a conference rather than undertake the many hours of travel, not to mention the jet lag that he would have had to endure to attend in person. Similarly, people with family difficulties, such as family members on their deathbeds, also benefit from the option to present virtually.
6. Another way virtual presentations benefit presenters lies in the fact that they do not need to obtain conference leave from their institutions. Such leave may be in short supply for many academics, e.g., some institutions only support international conference leave every two or three years.
7. The trend towards globalisation has facilitated the movement of people from one country to another. However, people from some countries, particularly poor countries, may face difficulties obtaining the visas necessary to attend international conferences.
8. Virtual presentations may produce better presentations for a few reasons. First, often virtual presentations need to be prepared in advance so that the conference organisers and presenters’ colleagues who will be facilitating the sessions can make the necessary preparations. This advance preparation encourages presenters to plan ahead, rather than preparing their presentations only a few hours in advance. Second, recording a presentation allows presenters opportunities for “do overs”, as they can rerecord when they make errors. Third, presenters who suffer debilitating stage fright may be more relaxed when presenting without the audience directly in front of them. Similarly, academics with more introvert personalities may find it more comfortable to interact virtually with conference participants. Fourth, virtual presentations facilitate people from the same institution doing a virtual presentation together, whereas in-person presentations by two or more academics would require everyone presenting to obtain leave and pay the necessary expenses.
9. It can be difficult to maintain connections made at international conferences. Indeed, our experience is that such connections have lifespans of less than a year.

However, as connections made at conference would usually find life via virtual means, connections made at virtual presentations might enjoy longer lives as the connections' life mode matches their birth mode.

10. Perhaps, the main benefit of virtual presentations is that they are easily shared. Conversely, in the case of in-person presentations, conference organisers often face the unpleasant task of chasing presenters to submit their full papers, and conference participants often have to wait to read the presentations until they appear in the form of a journal article or in the conference proceedings. Sharing by academics becomes easier because virtual presentations are already in a ready-to-share format. Furthermore, when academics share their virtual presentations via such fora as academia.edu or YouTube, academics who were unable to attend a particular conference can view the presentations.
11. Last but not least, given the increasing manifestations of humans' adverse impact on the environment, conferences might want to consider how they can shrink their environmental footprints. With transportation by air (perhaps the main way people travel to international conferences) being the most environmentally damaging means of transport, reducing air travel would, along with offering plant based food options for conference participants, constitute a green action by the conference and its sponsors. However, it should be noted that people can purchase offsets for their air travel (GEILING, 2014)

### **Possible Problems of Virtual Presentations**

While virtual presentations offer many benefits, the researchers in the present study found that many international conferences on education do not allow virtual presentations. This section of the paper considers some of the problems with virtual presentations which may lead conference organisers to exclude such presentations. The examples that illustrate these problems are based on the authors' actual experiences in organising and participating in conferences.

1. The conference venue may not have the necessary facilities for virtual presentations. For example, despite the proliferation of internet access and increasingly lower prices for such access, wireless internet connections remain unreliable in many places, even in wealthy countries. For instance, in late 2014, two of the authors were scheduled to use Skype to present at an international

- conference in a developed country, but at the time scheduled for their presentation, the conference organisers emailed saying that the internet was down at the conference venue.
2. The presenters may lack the optimal software or hardware. For instance, one time when recording a presentation, two of the authors of this paper had difficulty with the sound, and had to search for a better microphone and test the ones that they found. In the end, regardless of the microphone, the sound did not work, and they had to change software.
  3. Presenters may have the tools, but lack the knowledge of how to use them. For instance, PowerPoint presentation software has a function that allows presenters to record their voices. However, not all the authors know how to use it.
  4. Virtual presentations reduce the revenue earned by the conference organisers, because virtual presenters may, quite reasonably, be charged less than those who present in person, as virtual presenters do not use resources such as food, which is often provided to in-person participants. Furthermore, the city and country hosting the conference loses tourism revenue. Indeed, the governments of many countries, such as Singapore, provide funding to conferences in anticipation of the revenue that overseas conference participants will generate.
  5. Virtual presentations recorded in advance lack the flexibility of in-person presentations. For instance, in-person presenters can adapt what they do in their session to take into account what took place earlier in the conference. Similarly, in-person presenters can “think on their feet” to adjust their presentations based on participants’ reactions as the session unfolds. In contrast, with virtual presentations, even when they are done live, presenters can often see only a small fraction of the participants in their sessions. Thus, virtual presenters are less able to gauge audience reactions.
  6. This seeming inflexibility might make it difficult for virtual presenters to facilitate conference sessions, especially workshops, at least without co-facilitators who can carry a fair amount of the facilitation duties.
  7. Perhaps the main objection to virtual presentations lies in the view that face-to-face interactions as part of or outside of official conference sessions provide a substantially richer experience. For instance, technology is not yet available that would enable conference participants to hug or shake hands with long time

colleagues whom they only meet at conferences. For instance, one of the authors used to see a colleague only at the conferences of an organisation on which both serve on the governing board, but now that one of the colleagues has switched to doing virtual presentation, they may never meet again in person. Thus, the affective elements enjoyed when everyone is together in person may seem lacking when some of the presenters appear virtually.

In comparing in-person and virtual presentations, it is useful to consider Couto's (2018) argument that "the center of language is communicative interaction" (p. 153). Couto (p. 154) explained that "successful acts of communicative interaction presuppose communion between the interlocutors" and that "when there is communion ... there is satisfaction about simply being together." However, does "being together" necessitate being in the same physical space? Can communion also be achieved via affordances of modern technology? Furthermore, did earlier technologies, such as letters and telephone calls, also allow people to achieve some form of communion as part of their communicative interaction?

In support of virtual presentations, yes, it can be argued that presenters who fly to speak in person at conferences are enabling a richer form of communicative interaction than are those presenters who share their thoughts and feelings virtually. At the same time, though, what message is being communicated to the wider world by those presenters who fly to conferences and by those conference organizers who discourage virtual presentations? Are they saying, "Look at us. We can afford to fly to conferences. Yes, we know that flying contributes to climate change, but ..."

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the role of virtual presentations in international conferences on education. The researchers found that virtual presentations are not accepted by the majority of the international conferences on education that were sampled for this study. This result might seem surprising, given advances in presentation technology and the growing use of such technology in education. However, as discussed above, conference organisers have reasons for discouraging virtual presenters.

At the same time, academics who wish to share their work virtually have many alternatives to presenting at traditional conferences: videos, e.g., via YouTube; presentation slides, e.g., via Slide Share; papers, e.g., via academia.edu; and academic discussion groups, e.g., via Facebook groups. Additionally, many of these ways of sharing ideas have tools for promoting the building of community among academics, such as the message and sessions functions in academia.edu.

Another alternative to traditional conferences are 100% online conferences. For instance, in 2004, one of the researchers presented at the First International Online Conference of Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Research (SINGHAL & LIONTAS, 2004). In 2015, the K12Online Conference announced it will use such technologies at iTunes, Youtube, Twitter and podcasts. The conference extends over 12 days, and participation is free. The Art of Education Conference is a two-times-a-year online conference for art teachers (<http://www.theartofed.com/aoeconference>). It is not free, but a table on the conference website estimates that attending the online conference costs about an eighth of what it would cost to attend a similar conference in person.

One other idea to consider on the topic of virtual presentations at international conferences is to question the value of international conferences generally, especially given the adverse impact of air travel on climate change. Perhaps, academics should adopt a slogan from the environmental movement, 'Think globally, act locally' (GEDDES, as cited in BARASH, 2002), i.e., rather than looking overseas for opportunities to share with and learn from others, educators should do more to network with stakeholders in their own communities.

In conclusion, Stibbe (2015) in a seminal work on ecolinguistics, explains the dominance of consumerist ideology in contemporary society. Traditional in-person international conferences on education represent one form of this ideology, just going online and purchasing an airplane ticket to the conference location and securing a hotel reservation at or near the conference venue. Such conferences will probably continue to take place many years into the future. However, as technology improves and becomes more accessible, and as concerns about costs and environmental consequences of attendance at international conferences mount, educators will continue to explore alternative means of interacting with fellow professionals in other countries, including virtual presentations at international conferences. Conference organisers might wish to welcome such presentations and to facilitate good quality virtual presentations.

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Table 1

Conference organisers' concerns about virtual presentations

Lack of reliably strong internet connections at the conference venue	5
Hardware problems (e.g., projectors) due to either availability or cost	3
Software problems due to either lack of knowledge or cost	2
Insufficient people to attend to the needs of virtual presenters	2
Loss of income for conferences, as virtual presenters usually pay lower or no conference fees	3
Loss of tourism income for the conference's host country	1
Difficulties in interaction between virtual presenters and their audience during presentations	6
Reduced opportunities for informal interactions between virtual presenters and in-person conference participants	5
Lower quality of virtual presentations as compared to in-person presentations	3
Virtual presenters do not attend other presenters' sessions, thus depriving other presenters of audience	4
Unreliability of virtual presenters	3