

## ECER 2014: The Past, the Present and Future of Educational Research in Europe

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### The Use of Web 2.0 Tools to Design A Conference 2.0: A Case Study In Online Higher Education

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## Contribution

Although the submission of papers and participation in academic conferences may be seen as a routine or even a mandatory task, especially when envisioning an academic career, there is little research in the area (de Vries & Pieters, 2007; Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005).

Conferences can be an opportunity to learn, through sharing and knowledge construction. Their designed can stimulate the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and *digital habits* within communities and networks (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009) and constitute the ideal vehicle to formal and informal learning and knowledge management (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Conferences facilitate and enhance the creation of networks, they enable opportunities for informal learning and offer moments of socialization (Siemens, Tittenberger, & Anderson, 2008). Authors like Weller (2011) summarize the functions of a conference as follow: knowledge sharing, validation, networking, recognition and socializing. As L. Anderson & T. Anderson (2010, p. xi) remark

"(...) a professional conference usually consists of formal and informal scheduled talks and presentations by celebrity keynotes. These are usually followed by smaller sessions where members of the organisation are invited to share insights, developments, concerns, and issues in panel of individual presentations."

In this presentation we discuss a case study about the conference *myMPeL*, an annual conference organized and held from and for the learning community of an online master's program.

The *Conference myMPeL* has been held since 2010 as part of the Master Course in Elearning Pedagogy (MPeL), at Universidade Aberta (UAb, the Open University in Portugal). The course has adopted the pedagogical model (Modelo Pedagógico Virtual®) of the UAb (Pereira, Mendes, Morgado, Amante, & Bidarra, 2007), and is a response to a growing need of specialization for those working in the field of distance education and elearning. It seeks to explore emerging models and to develop strategies for the integration of ICT in online education. The *MPeL* takes place fully online and the *Conference myMPeL* is the only moment from the entire program held face-to-face (with a streamed online component). It intends to be a moment of socialization and of sharing of developed work by the MPeL's students with the course community and a wider community of professionals interested in online distance education and in the elearning field. According to Kelly, Tonkin and Shabajee (2005), nowadays it is possible to bring the world to a conference auditorium and, at the same time, expand a conference to the world. This is the characteristic of an amplified event (Kelly, 2011). The *Conference myMPeL* is a conference 2.0, organized and performed with Web 2.0 tools, which applies emerging pedagogies (Siemens & Tittenberger, 2009).

This article presents the outcomes of a study with the following main question: how can the organization format and management of an academic conference which uses Web 2.0 tools contribute to the success of a conference (defined as the achievement of the initial objectives of the organizers and the participants' expectations regarding learning)?

The main objectives of this study were to understand how the use of Web 2.0 tools facilitate and enhance learning in an academic conference, and to foster improvements in the organization of the *Conference myMPeL*.

The relevance of this study lays on a contribution to the success of future editions of the *Conference myMPeL*, as well as to academic and scientific conferences supported by ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), namely Web 2.0 services.

## **Method**

The strategy adopted in this study is primarily defined by the objectives of the study and the viable options with regard to the data collection and processing. Initially we adopted a quantitative approach, collecting and analysing data on international conferences, which are representative of the current scenario of academic and scientific conferences. In the second part, we adopted a qualitative approach, namely the Case Study. A questionnaire applied to organizers of international conferences aimed to identify the main characteristics of academic and scientific events and the use of Web 2.0 tools and services. An online survey was applied with the following main sections: Introduction; characterization of the event; portal of the event; Planning; Social Networks (in general); Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, communication tools, video, photo and presentations sharing; streaming; curation; badges; event overall satisfaction.

A convenience sample was chosen (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2005). The selected conferences observed the following criteria: - Holding year: 2011 or 2012; - Issue addressed related to distance education and elearning; - Different formats of conferences (online, blended, face-to-face; Conference, Festival, Unconference); - Scope: international. Five conferences were held in 2011 (COIED, EdMedia, EFQUEL/Concede, TEDxFIOCRUZ, SLACTIONS) and the remaining five in 2012 (Follow the Sun, PLECON, EDEN, IADIS, PLEConf). Of the total selected conferences (10), nine responses were obtained. The questionnaire applied to various actors involved in the Conference myMPeL consisted of ten (10) sections. A first set of questions concern the characterization of the use of tools and Web 2.0 services in general. In a second set, we sought to characterize the use of Web 2.0 in the specific context of the conference myMPeL, taking into account the different roles assumed by the conference participants (organizers, speakers and audience). Finally, the last set inquired about the perception on the potential of academic conferences supported by technology 2.0 for learning. Through the online questionnaire, 33 valid responses were obtained. Although we didn't claim to get an exhaustive and focused analysis, in complement, we collected and

analysed data referring to the Conference myMPeL on the following topics: Twitter used as a backchanneling tool (Ebner & Reinhardt, 2009); Facebook used as a social network; and data created on the conference's own portal.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The theme of this study presented itself as a crossroads between different areas of knowledge, namely, Educational Sciences and ICT. This study showed that there is a tendency to use ICT, various Web 2.0 services and communication channels. The concept of conference participant is no longer restricted to those who subscribe or register at the event. There is an audience present in the physical space but there is also an audience following the event, for example, through Twitter. The organization and involvement in the carrying out of an academic conference, which uses emerging and Web 2.0 tools and services and pedagogical practices can be a unique challenge. The active participation in such a conference is an interesting and rewarding task. In the present case, the myMPeL Conference allowed the master's students to experience learning in context (Figueiredo, 2009) and explore Web 2.0. The conference was confirmed as a learning space which facilitates knowledge construction, skills development, moments of socialization with peers and between students and teachers, and the opening of the MPeL to a wider community of professionals interested in Distance Education and Elearning. Further research is required. Participation in conferences is traditionally recognized as an important part in academic, professional and personal development. It will be important to find mechanisms that foster the success of a conference in all its facets (knowledge sharing and socialization) and, in parallel, implement mechanisms to enlarge each conference to the world of all interested professionals. As Downes (2011) comments: "The conference comes and goes in an instant". So we have to wait for a future with amplified and expanded conferences in which sharing and knowledge construction happens beyond the conference.

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