Conference Reviews

Personal Observations of Online Conferences vs. Face-to-face Conferences

Steven Taro Suzuki

Waseda University, Faculty of Science and Engineering

The pandemic we have experienced over the past couple years forced educators to change their methodology of teaching. At the beginning of the pandemic, I recall a period of panic as schools frantically tried to shift education to online classes, updating their learning management systems (LMS), providing workshops to teachers on how to use their LMSs, and online meeting programs such as Zoom and Webex. Teachers, especially those who were still operating in analog (paper-based materials and submissions) found the transition to online/on-demand courses challenging. In some cases, the difficulties forced some into retirement or unemployment. However, most teachers managed to make the transition with the help of their educational institutions as well as support groups like Online Teaching Japan (https://www.facebook.com/groups/603548090241536).

The last face-to-face conference I attended was JALT2019 in Nagoya. I presented at the conference with a one-hour research-oriented presentation in the area of corpus linguistics (Suzuki, 2019). Three months later, the pandemic hit, and I have not been to a face-to-face conference since. After becoming more comfortable with online education, I decided to attend my first online conference on May 29, 2021. It was the Research Center for Instructional Systems (RCiS) International Webinar 2021, hosted by Kumamoto University. It was a different experience for me, and I will summarize the presentations and compare the webinar with face-to-face conferences based on my experiences.

The main purpose of the RCiS International Webinar 2021 was to explore the alternatives and implications of using digital technology in language teaching. The webinar also aimed to outline the opportunities and challenges of incorporating technology-enhanced language learning. There were three speakers, Dr. Yoshiko Goto, Dr. Fei Victor Lim, and Dr. Willy Renandya. Dr. Goto discussed ways to integrate theory, practice, and technology for language learning through case studies (Goto, personal communication, May 29, 2021). Dr. Lim shared considerations in using digital technologies and how they shape teacher-student interactions (Lim, personal communication, May 29, 2021). Dr. Renandya covered key language learning principles and how to apply them in technologically-mediated lessons to enrich students' learning experiences (Renandya, personal communication, May 29, 2021). The webinar was 2 hours long (10:30-12:30), and at its peak, comprised 135 participants.

I will now compare/contrast face-to-face with online conferences in terms of my view of the advantages and disadvantages of both. The main advantage of the webinar for me was convenience. I did not have to spend time or money to travel to Kumamoto. I simply clicked on the link to join the Zoom meeting. I could also just turn off my camera when I had to use the restroom or when something came up that required my immediate attention without disrupting the presentations. Although I attended the entire webinar, I noticed some people coming and going during the presentation. In general, the webinar allowed educators from all over the world to attend and leave with ease. I surmise that if the conference were held on campus face-to-face, the number of participants would have been much smaller.

The main disadvantage of the webinar was the inability to interact freely with other webinar participants. I noticed a friend who also attended the webinar and direct-messaged him through the Zoom chat box, but it was not the same as would have been experienced in a face-to-face setting. In fact, for me, the main attractive point of face-to-face conferences is being able to meet and catch up with friends who live far from me in different prefectures. Of course, giving presentations and participating in others is meant to enhance my professional acumen, but my favorite part of conferences is catching up with friends, meeting

new people, and developing and maintaining relationships.

One other disadvantage was the limited time for Q&A, where I could see a number of hands going up, but only one or two people having the chance to ask a question. I imagine that this is a common problem in online conferences, so I will offer some plausible solutions. One could be to have participants write questions in the chat box during the presentations so that the presenter can start dealing with them at the end of their presentation. The presenter could announce beforehand that they will answer X number of questions and will choose which questions to answer by prioritizing relevance and content. Of course, another solution would be for presenters to finish at or before the time limit, which unfortunately was not the case at this webinar, hence the limited Q&A time.

Building on the aforementioned disadvantage, the primary advantage of face-to-face conferences is the human element. When sitting in an actual room, one can look around to see who the other participants are and get a better feel for the presenter by observing body language, gestures, and eye contact. If one is unable to ask a question to the presenter during Q&A, then there is still a chance to ask questions after the presentation, or later during the conference, or at some social events in the evening. Another aspect of face-to-face conferences is exposing oneself to a variety of contexts. For example, one thing I enjoyed at the JALT international conferences is the various institutes which display goods and services to the academic community. Being able to look at, touch, and feel teaching materials can never be experienced in an online conference.

However, there are some limitations to face-to-face conferences. For me, the main ones are time and money. Sometimes there are conferences I really want to attend but are held at inconvenient times when considering travel. With online conferences, a considerable amount of time is saved without the commute. In addition to the conference fee, transportation, food, and expenses can take big chunks out of an educational budget. A recent support grant that I received barely covered just the transportation to and from the conference.

Here, I shared some of my experiences from attending an online webinar and compared it to face-to-face conferences. Of course, there are many other aspects in terms of advantages and disadvantages of each, but I only focused on

the main ones for me. If I were hard-pressed to choose between the two, I would be in favor of face-to-face. However, ideally for me would be attending smaller conferences online while attending the larger ones face-to-face. This idea would be good for both conference planners and participants. For smaller conferences, it could maximize attendance and exposure due to the pure convenience of online meetings. For larger conferences, it could increase participation as there could be a buildup of enthusiasm by participants who are waiting to finally see people face-to-face. Moving in a similar direction as with the education system itself, I foresee a mixture of both online and face-to-face even when this pandemic is far away in the rearview mirror.

References

Goto, Y. (2021, May 29). Technology-enhanced language learning: Challenges and opportunities. https://www.gsis.kumamoto-u.ac.jp/en/announcements/20210529/

Lim, F. V. (2021, May 29). Designing learning with technology. https://www.gsis.kumamoto-u.ac.jp/en/announcements/20210529/

Renandya, W. (2021, May 29). Technology-enhanced language learning: challenges and opportunities. https://www.gsis.kumamoto-u.ac.jp/en/announcements/20210529/

Suzuki, S. T. (2019, November 3). *Corpora analysis to help students publish research* [paper presentation]. JALT2019: Teacher Efficacy, Learner Agency, WINC AICHI, Nagoya, Aichi, Japan.

Author bio:

Steven Taro Suzuki *is a recipient of the CUE Support Grant. He has presented at several CUE conferences, co-chaired three CUE symposia, and has served as a CUE guest editor. He currently teaches at Waseda University, Keio University, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His current research interests involve corpus linguistics and genre analysis. suzukitaro@hotmail.com*