

CALRG 2020 Evaluation Project Report: Recommendations for Online Conferences

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Introduction

The CALRG (Computers and Learning Research Group) 2020 Conference marked the first time that the annual conference had been held solely online and opened to an international audience. As many conferences move online in response to COVID-19, the Open University's OpenTEL research group funded a project to collect an extended amount of feedback on the experience of conference attendees, presenters, and organisers to create recommendations for holding online conferences.

Context

The CALRG conference was a three-day event held 15th-17th June 2020. The conference was organised using the EasyChair platform. During the event sessions were held using Adobe Connect. In addition, a Microsoft Teams 'team' was created for participants to interact during the event. The schedule and details of the conference can be found on the CALRG website (<http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/CALRG/>). The conference was attended by over 100 people from 7 countries, with 30 speakers.

Data Collection

Organisers, presenters and participants were invited to give feedback through surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Survey to organisers

Event organisers were invited to complete an email survey after each of the first two days that consisted of four questions: what went well, what was difficult, what was unexpected, and what should we have done differently? Seven organisers completed the survey in part or whole.

Survey to participants

A link to a web-based survey was distributed to participants after the conference asking for feedback with similar questions to those sent to the organisers. 15 out of 100 participants completed the survey. Participants who completed the survey were asked if they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview to learn more about their experiences at the conference and other online conferences.

Interviews

Interviews were held with a group of participants who represented the different roles involved in the conference. Seven interviews were held:

- Two attendees
- Two presenters who were members of CALRG
- Two presenters who were not members of CALRG
- An organiser

Findings

Key findings from the interviews and surveys are presented below in the form of advice.

Recommendations for organisers

Technology

- Choose a platform to host the event that is either very user friendly (e.g., Zoom) or familiar to many people (e.g., Microsoft Teams).
- Make sure you trial each platform thoroughly in advance of the events: presentations are relatively straightforward online but other conference formats and more innovative sessions require more planning (e.g. we found poster sessions to be problematic).
- Take accessibility into consideration when selecting your platform and in the options given to presenters (e.g., some may prefer to send in a recording of the presentation and just take live questions).
- Have a minimum of two facilitators in every session: one to introduce presenters and keep time, one to take care of technical challenges. Ensure the duties of each facilitator are clear (e.g., who will start the recording, who will monitor participants raising hands).
- Offer presenters and participants practice sessions before the conference to become familiar with the online environment. Consider sending out a list of what features (e.g., whiteboard, polls, break-out rooms, etc.) presenters might want to use; encourage use of software affordances to increase participation and sense of presence.
- Consider how your online environment will support networking and building a community of practice. This was frequently mentioned by attendees as a difficulty or shortfall of online conferences.
- Consider the logistics of how attendees will know where to find the link to join.
- Online sessions are usually easy to record, but need to be retrieved, archived and possibly edited (e.g., anonymising participants). Plan where the recordings will go beforehand and who will be responsible for managing logistics.

Scheduling

- Check for planned infrastructure interruptions (e.g., scheduled maintenance on web servers) and make back-up plans for what to do in the case of a complete technical breakdown, such as rescheduling sessions.
- Don't be afraid to experiment with different formats, including activities that allow participants to explore an online space (e.g., Padlet), and asynchronous as well as synchronous events (e.g., voting for favourite poster over the whole duration of the conference).
- Make the schedule less packed than a face-to-face conference as it is tiring to concentrate on a screen all day. Include more breaks to enable participants to stretch their legs, get a drink, etc.
- Create checklists for different roles during the conference - face to face conferences allow for agile pick up of jobs between a team, but this is more difficult in an online space. More structured allocation of responsibilities limits the possibility of confusion.
- Don't underestimate organiser workload and online time above and beyond hosting sessions. Identify which jobs are time critical (e.g., rapid uploading of session recordings, preparation for the next day's sessions) and allocate staff resources accordingly.

- Consider what will happen during handover of presentations or sessions. Will participants see a blank screen, the schedule or even have background music?
- Schedule specific social activities where the main objective is to build relationships and have fun. Examples include an online scavenger hunt, a space to post interesting facts about participants, speed chatting using breakout rooms

Communication

- Consider how many people you want to target with the event. Online events in theory can accommodate more people. Plan an external communication strategy accordingly.
- Organising a conference via online rather than face to face meetings comes with a heavier communication load. The organising team will exchange more emails before the conference than if all the organisers were in the same place. Expect this to happen and discuss communication preferences when the preparation begins.
- Use appropriate social media to reinforce communications and act as live side channels during the event (e.g Twitter). Decide on a back-channel communication tool for the organising team during the events and stick to it. There are so many communication platforms available now that unless one is decided upon, organisers may find themselves communicating via email, Teams, WhatsApp, Skype, Slack and more. Switching between programmes is a huge additional strain while monitoring the main conference.
- Consider different ways to provide feedback from sessions to presenters. At CALRG 2020 presenters requested copies of the live chat. In the doctoral consortium a Google Doc was used to collect feedback from a discussant and attendees.

Recommendations for presenters

Beforehand

- Practice using the online environment: if possible, arrange a practice session with the conference organisers to check their set-up.
- Don't be afraid to request a different presentation format, such as a live demonstration or to send a pre-recorded video presentation.

On the day

- Set a timer next to your screen as it is hard for the facilitator to give you a discrete reminder about reaching time limit.
- Decide if you will react to comments and questions in the chat in real-time or after you've finished the presentation. Let attendees know this at the start of your presentation.
- Introduce yourself (your institutional affiliation and interests): this information will contextualise session recordings.
- Mentally prepare yourself for receiving fewer cues on how your presentation is going as you can't see attendees' body language; trust that it is going well!

Recommendations for participants

Beforehand

- Look over the schedule beforehand to see what you really want to attend and what is optional depending on how you feel.

On the day

- Limit distractions such as emails.
- Stand up and move around at least between sessions.
- Don't be afraid to interact through the chat or other means.
- Mute your mic when not speaking.

Future Work

The ongoing pandemic will mean that CALRG2021 is likely to be held at least partly online. This report will inform the planning and running of the event, and the organisers will use this report's evaluation methods as a starting point for an upstream evaluation approach to understanding the benefits and challenges of CALRG2021 (scheduled for 15-16 June 2020).

Furthermore, this research has been used to inform best practice for the ongoing online weekly CALRG seminar series that has replaced face to face seminars during the pandemic.

Appendix 1: Participant Survey Questions

1. What went well in CALRG2020?
2. What worked better than expected?
3. What could we do better next time?
4. What session did you like the best, and why?
5. What one top tip would you give people who are thinking of attending an online conference?
6. How did you hear about the conference?
7. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share with us? Please add them below
8. We'd like to interview a few people for more in-depth feedback. If you would be happy to chat with us about your experiences, then please leave your email address below.

Appendix 2: Organiser Survey Questions

1. What went well?
2. What was difficult?
3. What was unexpected?
4. What should we have done differently?

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

1. From your perspective as a presenter what was your overall impression of CALRG2020
2. Is there anything in particular that you enjoyed about the conference?
3. How do you think this conference compared with other similar conferences that are face to face?
4. What about things that you believe could be improved? Anything that you noticed that perhaps didn't work quite well and could be done differently?
5. Do you have any thoughts on perhaps how organisers could support presenters at online conferences compared to perhaps face to face events? Is there a different type of support or is there something specific that you believe organisers could do to support presenters?
6. Any other general impressions of the conference or anything you would like to add, or any advice for future conferences?