

# The Student-Directed EdTech Conference: Nurturing Teacher Leadership Skills

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**Abstract:** This paper is about the evolution of a teacher education program sponsored educational technology conference as it moved from a student-assisted conference to a completely student directed conference. Situated as part of a graduate-level educational technology course, we detail the evolution of the conference with a contextual history and discusses how the current structure of the student directed conference impacts students' leadership skills, including developing brand identity, maintaining online presence, establishing equitable expectations, and engaging in practical event planning. We conclude the paper with faculty reflections that examine problems, solutions, and successes.

## Context and History

In the spring of 2009, while attending the SITE Conference in Charleston, South Carolina, Dr. Liz Stephens, who was a founding faculty member of the Master's in Educational Technology, formulated the idea of conducting a conference as part of her class EDTC 5330, Implementing Technology in Education. The goal of EDTC 5330 was to introduce students to the leadership skills required for implementing technology in a K-12 education program, and the course also covered conducting a program evaluation and grant writing. The new objective of planning and presenting at a professional-development conference fit nicely into this course, and the first conference was held in the spring of 2009.

This first conference, and all conferences from 2009 to 2013, were planned with the valuable assistance of a former Ed Tech student who upon graduation, had become the director of training at the Texas Computer Education Association. Since she was used to putting together a large-scale conference each year, she had a conduit to resources needed to get the student conference off to a good start, including keynote speakers and sponsors.

Dr. Stephens retired at the end of 2011, and the teaching of the class and organizing of the conference passed to [Author]. The spring 2012 conference was a direct continuation of the

previous years, and it gives a good indication of how the conference was organized and presented from 2009 to 2012.

The conference as originally conceived could best be described as a student-assisted conference, because while the students and instructor focused primarily on the writing and planning of student presentations, most of the conference planning was in the hand of a former Ed Tech student who served as Conference Program Coordinator .

Conference Program Coordinator's role:

- Visited class about a third of the way through the semester to meet with students.
- Created and updated the conference website.
- Created the conference submission website through which students would submit their presentation topics and abstracts, and which was used by [Monica] to create the online and printed program.
- Located and booked the keynote speaker(s) and vendors.
- Provided printed certificates for attendees needing one for professional-development credit.
- Publicized the conference in the TCEA email newsletter.
- Oriented attendees to the day's offerings during the opening session.
- Presented a session of her own, as well as recruited fellow TCEA trainers to present sessions.

The students did help with promotion at their own schools, and with logistics on the day of the conference, including setup, teardown and cleanup, manning the registration table, and lunch and refreshments.

## **Conference Overview**

The EdTech conference takes place on one single Saturday at Texas State University and generally held from 9am - 3pm. The EdTech program receives no funds for putting on the conference but the Curriculum and Instruction department does help pay for renting the venue, donates to the morning breakfast snacks, and sponsors the keynote speaker through travel expenses. Much of the funding for gifts and other conference expenditures is by secured by students from various local sponsors. The free admission conference is open to anyone including area teachers and all education students and faculty.

In the past 4 years the conference has averaged 11 to 14 unique presentations by students. Students from outside of the EDTC 5330 account for only 1 to 2 presentation per year. During the 2012 and 2013 conference years which were student assisted, 5 to 8 vendor and sponsor presentations were given. The last two conference years which were student directed resulted in no vendor presentations (an option chosen by the students) but saw the emergence of C&I

faculty presentations (6 in 2014, 3 in 2015). Poster sessions were added in 2015 and 6 students participated. The Edtech program eportfolio presentations delivered as a one hour poster session has had 8 to 10 participants each year since the conference inception.

Sample themes for the conference include:

- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education for Global Learners
- Come and Tech It!
- Tech Up!



**Figure 1.** Logos from past conferences

Example presentation titles chosen and delivered by students include:

- Navigating the BYOD Classroom
- Using Technology to Increase Reading/Writing in a Math Classroom
- Using Prezi in The Foreign Language Classroom
- App Smashing: Google Earth Collides with Explain Everything
- “STEAM UP” Your Classroom: Open Source
- Infographics: Transforming Boring Data into Fun Graphics
- 3D Printing in the Classroom
- Kahoot!: Gaming Collaboration in the Classroom (B.Y.O.D)
- Mapping Across the Curriculum with Google’s My Maps

## **Reformatting for a Student directed conference**

After several years of student-assisted conference, the course and conference were passed on to [Author] who felt it was time for students to take a more proactive and vital role in planning, organizing, and actual running of the conference. While this was a daunting endeavor and a

somewhat unfamiliar task for us, we felt that the rewards in both the educational and motivational processes would be worthwhile.

### **Collaboratively Building a Better Professional Development Experience**

Keeping in mind that professional development and conference presentations in general are typically the source of groans from tired and overworked teachers, the first few class meetings were structured with activities to help the students *plan a conference that they would actually want to attend*. This included:

1. discussion of “what I hate about professional development”
  - a. personal time
  - b. money
  - c. presentation strategies
  - d. vendors
2. considerations for what makes professional development worth attending
  - a. How can we develop programming to engage in-/pre-service teachers, administrators, and teacher educators?
  - b. How can we encourage participants to give up a Saturday?
3. conducting reconnaissance of local area EdTech professional development conferences
  - a. What do you like about their conference themes and/or marketing?
  - b. What do you like about their presentation formats and the way the program is organized?
4. brainstorming ways to borrow awesome ideas from other organizations
  - a. themes
  - b. presentation types
  - c. marketing strategy
5. repackaging those ideas to fit in with our context
  - a. What do you envision for the “look” and “feel” of the EdTech conference?
  - b. What types of topics would you want to present?

### **Program Committee Teams to Make it all Happen**

After the general vision was collaboratively determined, the students volunteered to serve on four program committee teams with specific tasks for developing the conference, which are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.**  
**Student Team Structure, Goals, and Tasks**

TEAM	GOAL	TASKS
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Team Brand Identity	<i>Design and Develop the “Look and Feel” of the Conference</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● conference logo</li> <li>● flyer advertisement</li> <li>● marketing strategy</li> <li>● conference t-shirts</li> </ul>
Team Online Presence	<i>Design and Develop the Online Outreach and “Hub”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● develop website</li> <li>● create online submission form</li> <li>● create online registration form</li> <li>● social media updates</li> </ul>
Team Expectations	<i>Design and Develop Criteria for Equitability and Access</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● develop “Call for Presentations”</li> <li>● create presentation scoring rubric</li> <li>● send email to presenters with acceptance decision</li> <li>● create program schedule</li> </ul>
Team Event Planning	<i>Design and Develop Public Relations Campaign</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● solicit sponsors and donations from local community</li> <li>● envision the “feel” of the conference activities</li> <li>● organize catered lunch</li> <li>● secure prizes and goodies to be raffled at conference</li> </ul>

Though they were divided into four separate teams, each of the teams had to negotiate collaborative efforts to make it all come together and be cohesive. This required the use of collaborative planning tools, such as Google Docs and video chats using Google Hangout.

### Tech Up! at the 2015 EdTech Conference

After working hard throughout the semester, the students got to see the fruits of their labor on conference day. With a variety of programming structures (presentation, panel, poster/innovation station demo, workshop), there were a variety of relevant technology integration topics geared toward content standards (ELA, mathematics, social studies, science, humanities/fine arts, special education) for local area teachers in a variety of contexts (early childhood, middle school, high school, post-secondary).



Figure 2. Logo for 2015 EdTech Conference.

Here is what the schedule for the free Saturday conference looked like:

- 9:00-9:45am Keynote
- 9:45-10:30am Gallery Style Poster Sessions/Innovation Stations on display
- 10:30-11:30am Breakout sessions for presentations
- 11:30am-12:30pm Lunch and Birds of a Feather topics (bring your own or pre-order)
- 12:30-1:30pm Breakout sessions for presentations
- 1:30-2:15pm Gallery Style Poster Sessions/Innovation Stations/EDTC grad portfolios
- 2:15-3:00pm Closing Session with panel, prizes

## **Faculty Reflections**

Although the conference hasn't been without problems in the past six years, upon reflection the EdTech faculty feel that there have been many successful outcomes from the conference learning process. The following two sections will briefly discuss several problems and possible solutions, and three of the more successful conferences results.

### **Problems and Solutions**

Perhaps the biggest problem encountered with the student directed conference is the lack of attendance from area teachers, students in other programs, and education faculty. Although the conference is open to any faculty or student to submit a proposal for presentation, we have gotten very few outside of the students required to present. We realize that this is busy time of the year for students and teachers as the semester winds down but we are considering several possible solutions to boost attendance.

- Open call for submissions - send out invitations to faculty and other EdTech students to submit a proposal for the conference. Previously this has been mostly accomplished via word of mouth but a better system is needed.
- Continue to promote the e-portfolio portion of the conference - graduating masters student are now presenting their exit portfolios as part of the conference and these sessions are a great opportunity for current students in the program to see examples of finished products.
- Publicity - in the past students have spent a large portion of time working on finding sponsors for the conference, this year students will be tasked to conduct a more aggressive publicity campaign. These items may include more traditional media contacts, social media contacts, and visiting local area schools to engage with teachers.
- Recruitment opportunity - The EdTech faculty are applying this year to receive graduate college recruitment funding. This money can be used to promote the EdTech conference and in turn be a recruitment tool for the program the graduate college.

Another issue related to attendance each year is the conference date. The conference date has been moved several times in order to accommodate both teaching and testing schedules in the

local school districts. The date has been set as early as the end of March and as late as early May. Since the conference is a student directed endeavor, the date must take place late in the semester to allow time for learning and applying the planning concepts. In reality, we have concluded it may not be the date as much as just the fact the conference takes place on a Saturday near the end of the school year when teachers are most busy and stressed.

We also would like to our former students be more of a presence at the conference. Once students leave the program we often lose track of them and staying in contact is much more difficult. To that end, we are developing better communication channels through Facebook and Twitter to reach students once they have graduated. Another way to possibly boost attendance of former students is to make them feel welcome so they still feel like part of the program. One solution used this past year was to bring in a former student as our keynote speaker. This not only inspired our current students but drew several former students to attend. However, is our acknowledged issue with attendance in reality a problem? Is bigger really better? Is success measured in numbers or should success be measured by enthusiasm, commitment, and learning? Would the conference be better with more attendees or would the present give and take sessions become a mere presentation of content?

## **Successes**

We feel that our success with the EdTech conference is due in large part to adhering to the adult teaching strategies. As detailed by Holyoke (2007), the conference planning tasks touch on virtually all of the adult learning principles. The learners were free to self direct and learn about the planning in their own way while realizing the importance of the tasks. They were also allowed to use past experiences in conference attendance and in other areas such as graphic design and web presence to build the conference program. Since this conference was a reflection of their learning and program, the learners felt it important and motivational while being guided in a positive manner by the instructor.

Three of the successes which we will briefly discuss include venue, student engagement, and positive reviews. The first four years of the conference was held in the College of Education. In 2013 the conference was moved to the LBJ Student Center which used for many campus conferences. The LBJ Student Center provided a teaching theater for a keynote, many breakout rooms for the remaining sessions, and a large hallway for setting up tables for poster and eportfolio sessions. Although the facilities in the College of Education were more than adequate, the move to the student center immediately gave the conference a more professional and real-life dimension that had been previously lacking.

While student engagement had always been high, conducting and presenting at the Edtech conference gave students a heightened sense of responsibility and engagement. As detailed in the

previous sections of this paper, it was amazing to see the amount of work that students were willing to put in to make sure that the conference turned out well. Initial fears of the program faculty that the conference could reflect poorly on the EdTech program were quickly dispelled as students took ownership of the conference and made sure that the program in which they were part of was seen in a favorable light.

Attendee reviews of the conference have been very positive. The majority of presentations were given a “very good” to “exceptional” rating and conference comments generally have reflected those ratings. Several positive comments for example were:

- “Good presentations that are applicable to k-12 and universities”
- “Great ideas and practical activities”
- “Common sense approach to using devices and keeping students focused”
- “Fantastic - thanks for teaching about our 21st century students and their learning”

In light of the fact that most of the students were planning a conference and giving their first conference presentation, the EdTech faculty have been pleased with the feedback from program students, education faculty, and outside teacher attendees.

## Conclusion

This paper details the evolution of the EdTech conference with a contextual history and discusses how the current structure of the student directed conference impacts students’ leadership skills, including developing brand identity, maintaining online presence, establishing equitable expectations, and engaging in practical event planning. We conclude the paper with faculty reflections that examine problems, solutions, and successes.

## References

Holyoke, Laura B (2007). Lessons in conference planning: Adult learning principles at work. *Journal of Adult Education*, 36(2), pp. 40-43. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ891069.pdf>

## Resources

Websites for previous four EdTech Conferences

- <http://edtechconference.wp.txstate.edu> - 2015



*SITE 2016 - Savannah, GA, United States, March 21-26, 2016*

- <http://edtechconference.wp.txstate.edu/program-overview> - 2014
- <https://sites.google.com/a/tcea.org/edtech2013/home> - 2013
- <https://sites.google.com/a/tcea.org/edtech2012/home> - 2012