



Clive Shepherd

# Why we need conferences

At the time of writing it is early January and the conference season is about to get into full swing with Learning Technologies at London's Olympia. For the cynical among us, it's easy to think of conferences as rather old hat – top-down and 'push' in an era that is increasingly bottom-up and 'pull'; very un-green when you consider that we face huge environmental challenges; very extravagant when everyone but the Chinese are running out of money. But having spent a fair bit of time recently immersed in the book *The Power of Pull* by John Hagel III, John Seely Brown and Lang Davison (2010), I'm convinced that conferences will have an important role to play for many years to come.

The reason? Well, conferences provide an ideal setting for serendipitous encounters – discovering what you did not know you did not know/ meeting people you did not know you needed to know. The setting is ideal because everyone there has some commonality of purpose and interest and approaching complete strangers is not only acceptable, it is actively encouraged.

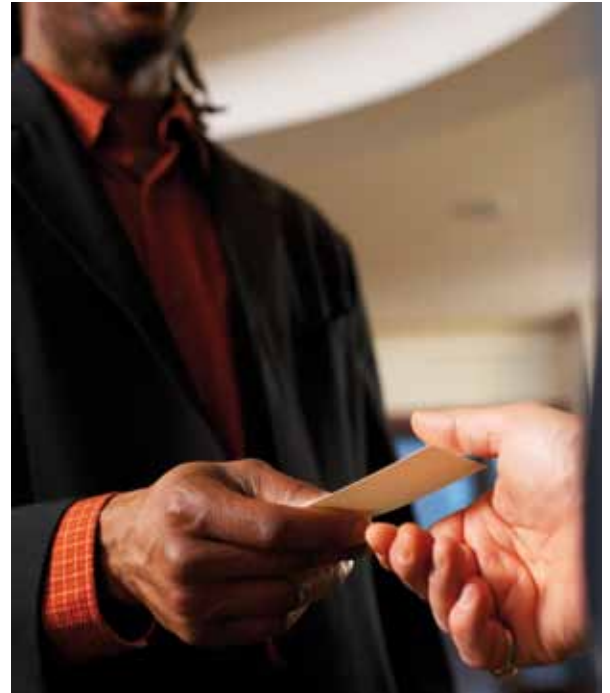
Conferences are primarily networking events – they bring people together and spark off opportunities. The presentations themselves can be useful, but with the exception of a few 'must-see' speakers, you'd be better off in most cases accessing the material online. It's hard to pin down exactly what makes a particular speaker a 'must-see', but somehow you know intuitively. Just like there are certain actors, musicians, sportspeople and other performers that you simply must see live at some point in your life, there are certain individuals who are so prominent in your

profession that you get a buzz out of being in the same room as them. No disrespect to the rest, but it's probably more convenient to watch them on video or read them in print, at a time and pace that suits you.

Of course, not all conference sessions are passive and there is certainly value to be gained by participating in discussions and other activities with fellow participants. This is something we've long acknowledged at the eLearning Network, for which I have been Chair for the past three years. We work hard at making the sessions as varied and interactive as possible. We also keep them short, so if a speaker or topic fails to capture your imagination, at least there will be another one along shortly. We took that to an extreme in 2010 with a Pecha Kucha competition. In case you haven't experienced this format before, each presenter is allowed just 20 slides, each lasting for 20 seconds, with which to make their point. You would be amazed to see what can be achieved in six minutes and forty seconds.

Would people attend conferences without the keynotes and the other formal sessions? Probably not, but perhaps they should, because by far the most important interactivity at any conference is informal. Serendipitous meetings are necessary because they stimulate thinking outside the box. When we know what we don't know it's easy – we simply Google it, check out a forum or consult our online networks. But however many blogs we subscribe to or Twitter feeds we follow, we're always in danger of playing safe, sticking with the people we already know all about.

True, chance encounters can also come through links in blogs, forums and tweets that take you to



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unexpected places and people, but still much depends on who's already in your network – and remember that not everyone who might be important to you is that active or visible online.

Conferences and social networks work in harmony, not competition. Those people you encounter online, you are then keen to meet up with when you do find yourself in the same physical space. And you follow up with the people you meet at conferences by getting their details and befriending them online.

To make effective use of the time and money you spend at a conference requires effort. First of all, make the most of the formal opportunities: select sessions that fall outside your usual comfort area, take notes, ask questions, say 'hello' to the speakers, tweet or blog about what you discover. But most importantly, put yourself about. Get out there and meet people, even if you'd prefer to hide yourself away on your computer.