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Instant Online reporting of conferences and events.

Rod Ward RGN BSc RNT MA Ed

Lecturer, School of Nursing & Midwifery, University of Sheffield

WWW: http://www.rodspace.co.uk

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Over the last few years I have developed a tradition of reporting on conferences and study days via the World Wide Web on the day on which events have happened. This short article sets out some of the reasons, techniques and hurdles involved.

Whenever I attend a conference or study day, particularly if it is paid for by my employer, or I get time off to go, I am expected to write a report about the experience, sessions attended and what I have learnt so that this can be shared with colleagues. I'm also often asked to write reports for journals such as ITIN.

I have tried to make notes during the events and then write these up when I get home, however it never seems to be very high on the priority list, particularly if I have loads of emails and other work to catch up on. In addition, I found that the material was often out of date before it was circulated.

As a result I started to try to write my reports as I went along, initially as a word-processed file, which I just printed out when I got home, which could then be photocopied and sent to colleagues.

During the early 1990's I started to created pages for the fledgling World Wide Web and saw this as a medium to publish my reports and enable others to see them fairly quickly after the event.

The earliest reports that are available are from the CTI Nursing & Midwifery conference in 1996 the report can be seen at: http://www.rodspace.co.uk/cti1st.htm,
and the NSG conference in the same year (see [http://www.rodspace.co.uk/nsg96.htm](http://www.rodspace.co.uk/nsg96.htm)).

As part of the process I tried to get others to enter short comments about their experience of the conference, what they had learnt or any general themes they thought were emerging from the event. The intention was to give readers a wider perspective on the event taking place from different individuals backgrounds and cultures. This is quite difficult as it generally meant having my notebook computer in bars or coffee rooms or at a conference dinner or similar event and explaining to people what I was doing in an attempt to get their collaboration and to write a short comment. Often people would say I'll let you have some comments later, but it was difficult to catch up with them again. The people I tended to ask to provide a comment are those that I already know and this perhaps limited the diversity of contribution, which may have been obtained.

This process has developed and I now include photos taken with a digital camera of venues, speakers etc.

To streamline the process I try to set up page templates before attending the conference and then just have to add content as I go along, and I do not find the process to arduous. I always intend to tidy up the reports later, including checking the English, spelling etc after I get home, but somehow never seem to get around to this.

There have however been some problems, particularly in getting an Internet connection to enable me to upload the reports to a web server. This was a major problem when I started however it seems that many conference venues and hotel rooms now have cyber cafés where I can scrounge an Internet connection, and hotels have a second phone line for use with a lap top computer.

Possibly my greatest difficulty was when the fuse blew in the mains plug for my lap top while in Auckland New Zealand at the NI 2000 conference (see [http://www.rodspace.co.uk/ni2000/index.html](http://www.rodspace.co.uk/ni2000/index.html) ). Visits to various electrical retailers convinced me that in New Zealand electrical appliances do not have fuses in their plugs! The nearest I could get was in a large garage trying out car fuses, without any success. I was extremely grateful to a female colleague from the UK who lost the use of her hair dryer for a few days so that I could borrow her fuse!

This form of instant reporting by one individual, will never be as good as the process of online news from organisations such as the BBC because of the disparity of resources, however I hope that it provides a useful service to others who are not able to attend the events. I generally let people know the URL for the reports on the first day by posting a message to relevant mailing lists and newsgroups. These tend to be the nursing informatics list nrsing-l, NSG mailing lists and a staff mailing list for my employer, the University of Sheffield.

I am always surprised by the number of people who access the reports which can be 100 - 200 a day for the first few days, and then tailing off to occasional users after a few weeks. Most of the readers of the reports are from the UK and US, but others from Australia, Asia and even Africa have also taken a look. The responses I've had have generally been very positive and grateful for the service; perhaps those who do not like it do not access it or do not send me comments. I have had one or two
messages from conference organisers disagreeing with my reflection of events but, as I say to them, I can only offer my own perspective on proceedings.

I would like to see this process developed to enable virtual participation by those unable to attend the event in person, enabling them to contribute to debates and offer their own perspectives on the issues under discussion. This would require a lot more work and greater involvement by the organisers of events. As a minimum I would like to see the papers presented published on the web "in real time" as soon as the speaker completed their presentation, however this may reduce the sales of conference proceedings. A development is web casting of speakers presentations, which requires more advanced, and expensive equipment, possibly with the inclusion of videoconferencing, shared whiteboards etc so that the contribution of those at remote sites can be accessible to those attending in person and virtually.

I do not see these "instant" reports ever replacing the properly edited proceedings of a conference, but they may help to develop some of the more human side of the development of health informatics and the individuals involved. All of the reports I have done in this way can be accessed from: http://www.rodspace.co.uk/dev.htm I would welcome any feedback or ideas for improving this process.