A Report on

Partnerships for Professionalism,
Planning a Virtual-Hybrid Model Pre-Conference

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Introduction

On October 6, 2011, the STC Academic Special Interest Group (SIG) hosted, for the first time, a one-day pre-conference in conjunction with the 2011 CPTSC Annual Conference, held at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Called the "Partnerships for Professionalism Pre-Conference," the meeting had as its purpose to promote an active exchange of information between industry and the academy and to facilitate cross-boundary collaborations.

The pre-conference theme, "Partnerships for Professionalism: Connecting Practitioners, Educators, and Students," paralleled that of the CPTSC conference to ensure a focus on themes of interest to both groups. Initially, we did not envision the pre-conference as a hybrid, with both virtual and face-to-face presentations. However, allowing for virtual presentations became critical to developing the pre-conference program for a number of reasons. While some of those invited to present at the pre-conference had plans to attend CPTSC, not all interested participants could attend in person: work conflicts and travel budget constraints began to limit our participant pool and negatively impact our planned program. We decided that if we were to host a cross-boundary conference, we needed to employ technology to do so, as is becoming a common practice in industry and in online education. As Eggers and O'Leary (2011) note, cross-boundary collaborations (XBC) rely on the use of technologies "to connect, to innovate and to execute."

The result of our efforts was an invigorating, information-packed day of panel presentations. Attendees and presenters found both the information shared and the hybrid format of delivery of great value. In the following article, members of the pre-conference committee discuss how the event was organized, the lessons learned along the way, and our plans for next year's pre-conference.

Planning, logistics, and the hybrid conference model

As part of the hybrid model, we wanted to include the ability for virtual presenters and physical participants to interact in real-time. As a result, Skype was used for audio and video conferencing, and attendees had access to wireless Internet during the sessions. In addition to an onsite panel moderator for each session, we enlisted a technology specialist to assist in calling presenters, sharing links, transitioning slides, and troubleshooting problems. Virtual presenters were organized into Skype calling groups. In preparation for their sessions, presenters were called and connected during the breaks. The video and media portion of the presentation used a standard computer, projector, screen setup. The audio portion was fed through the conference room speakers and a microphone was provided so participants could interact with presenters during the question and answer portion of sessions. This resulted in a successful model, and was particularly entertaining to the audience when two or more virtual participants interacted on the screen during the question and answer sessions. In addition, several presenters remained connected so they could participate in later sessions. In doing so, audience and presenters both were able to participate virtually.

The other conference logistics followed a typical conference model. Registration was free and available on both the CPTSC conference and STC Academic SIG Web sites, and approximately 50

people attended the conference, including two keynote speakers and 17 presenters. The pre-conference started with a complimentary continental breakfast at 8:00am and ended with closing remarks at 4:15pm. Panels lasted approximately 50 minutes with 10 minute breaks in between, and there were longer breaks scheduled for the complimentary lunch and afternoon snack.   In addition to the main session room, we setup a break room for participant interaction.

Pre-Conference theme selection
When presented with the opportunity to plan a one-day event, we decided the mini-conference theme would reflect the core principle of the Academic SIG: to promote partnerships between academics and industry professionals. Our goal was to bring together educators, students, and professionals to discuss current issues important in the field of technical communication. As a result, our theme was "Partnerships for Professionalism: Connecting Practitioners, Educators and Students." Initially we decided on a four panel conference, but due to the overwhelming response from presenters, we accommodated a fifth panel, which fit nicely in the program. The five panels included the following:

- Certification and assessment
- Virtual mentoring and internships
- Social networking and technical communication
- Cross-organizational collaboration
- Making collaboration a priority

Ideally, we planned for each panel to have at least one educator, one student, and one practitioner, although it was not possible for some sessions. However, since our attendance included members from all three groups, each session produced the critical conversations we had sought to encourage in the conference.

Lessons learned
Participant feedback addressed several areas: approval of our choice of panel topics and presenters; support for the hybrid-virtual model; and expression of need for more, similar collaborative events for academic and industry professionals.

Overall participants found the "information-packed" pre-conference of great value, both in terms of cost (there was no cost to participants) and information gleaned. Through the adoption of the hybrid-virtual model, we were able to create a venue or scene for a cross-boundary collaboration, a temporary network that allowed persons from various organizations to participate and "create value" (Deloitte GovLab and Harvard Kennedy Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, 2011). Our decision to invite speakers rather than have a call for proposals was well received and viewed by participants as helpful in focusing the pre-conference theme, panel topics, and balance of participants. Participants found the panels "well coordinated" and thought "topics flowed well." The sessions were described as "quick," "dynamic," and "interactive." Participant feedback on the single (albeit packed) track was positive: **"**I liked the size of the event, with just one 'track' that everyone participated in." The only suggested change to the pre-conference format, which has been adopted for next year's

pre-conference, was to reduce the number of panels to allow additional time for open discussion.

We received overwhelming support for the hybrid format, both from physical participants and those who presented through Skype, and received repeated comments on "how well" the hybrid panels worked. Many expressed a need for increased participation by academic and industry professionals in similar events and panels, forums that could lead to increased collaboration between the two groups on research projects, mentoring and internships opportunities, and curriculum development.

Looking ahead

In a pre-conference evaluation form, one anonymous participant encouraged, "Have a 'sequel' in Michigan next year. And be sure to invite me. Maybe we can go on a morel mushroom hunt!" The Academic SIG is acting on this suggestion and invites you to attend next year's pre-conference on Thursday, September 27, 2012, prior to the CPTSC conference being hosted at Michigan Tech University in Houghton, Michigan.

For this year's one day pre-conference, our theme will be "Partnerships for Professionalism: Collaboration, Diversity, and Technology in Academia and Industry." We thought repeating "Partnerships for Professionalism" would provide our pre-conference name with brand recognition (i.e., The Partnerships for Professionalism Pre-Conference).   Once again, the partnership theme will reflect our SIG's main objective, to bridge academic and industry interests, and the sub-title is aligned with this year's CPTSC conference themes. Based on these factors, and feedback from last year's participants, we selected four panels, which will feature the following:

- Intercultural communication, collaboration and diversity
- Pedagogy, e-learning and continuing education
- Collaborative technologies and applications
- Research, academic and industry partnerships

This fall, we plan to incorporate many of the successful elements and suggestions from our first pre-conference, including keynote speakers, the hybrid-virtual model for presenters, and additional time for sessions, breaks, and side conversations between participants. We look forward to "seeing" many of you, physically or virtually, in Houghton this fall.

References

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