

Preprint: "Which conference do you attend? A look at the conference attendance of educational technology professionals" to appear in *Educational Technology*

Lowenthal, P. R. (in press). Which conferences do you attend? A look at the conference attendance of educational technology professionals. *Educational Technology*.

## **Which Conference Do You Attend? A Look at the Conference Attendance of Educational Technology Professionals**

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### **Abstract**

Educational technology professionals attend conferences each year. Many have funds to attend at most 1-2 conferences each year. As a result, educational technology professionals must make a decision of which conferences to attend. The following article reports on what conferences other educational technology professionals attend.

I regularly attend conferences. They give me a chance to share what I am working on while also learning about what others are doing in my field. In fact, conferences are perhaps my number one source of professional development and professional networking each year (apart from social media outlets) (see Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009, 2011 for more on social media). For the past five years I have attended AECT (Association for Educational Communications and Technology) and AERA (American Educational Research Association) as well as a number of other conferences that happened to be in Denver when I was living in Colorado (e.g., EDUCAUSE, ISTE, CiTE, WCET, Technology in Education). But recently, I began reflecting on why I attend AECT and AERA each year and not other conferences.

During my graduate studies, I was encouraged to attend and present at conferences. The faculty in my program seemed to attend and present at AECT and AERA almost religiously each year. While it was never explicitly stated, implicitly it became clear to me that these were the conferences to attend and present at. At the same time though, I worked full time throughout my graduate studies. For the most part, my colleagues at work (whether when I worked in Teacher Education or specifically in faculty support and online learning), though, attended different conferences (e.g., ASCD or SITE or EDUCAUSE ELI). But despite this, each year, I still find myself going back to AECT and AERA and yet each year I wonder if I am missing out from not attending different conferences. I find myself wondering what conferences other professionals in our field attend.

In fact, as I began packing for AERA in Vancouver this past spring, these questions began to nag at me once again. So I decided to reach out to the professional community on ITForum and ask others which conferences they attend. But rather than simply ask for individual responses, I decided to create a simple google form to collect the responses I got--mainly in an effort to be able to share the results with the larger community. I created a basic google form with four questions (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Survey Questions for Educational Technology Professionals*

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1. Please select the one that best describes what you primarily do... (I realize this isn't always an easy question). I consider myself a...
    - educational technologist / instructional technologist
    - instructional designer
    - professor of instructional design and technology
    - trainer
    - human performance technology professional
    - instructional developer
    - elearning professional
    - graduate student
    - Other:
  2. I regularly attend or hope to attend regularly the following conferences / professional meetings
    - American Educational Research Association (AERA)
    - Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT)
    - American Society for Training & Development (ASTD)
    - International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI)
    - Annual Sloan Consortium International Conference on Online Learning
    - EDUCAUSE Annual Conference
    - EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI)
    - International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)
    - Edmedia
    - E-Learn
    - Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE)
    - Annual Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning
    - Other:
  3. Typically...
    - My place of employment pays for my conference attendance
    - I pay for my conference attendance
    - My place of employment pays for part of my conference attendance
    - Other:
  4. Why do you attend these conferences and not others?
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The researcher in me in hindsight wishes I would have taken more time thinking about the questions to ask (e.g., What was the best conference you have ever attended and why? or Which professional organizations are you a member of? or Do you have to present at a conference to get funding to attend?). But this wasn't a research study. I simply had a question for the members of ITForum. At the same time, though, I suspected (based on my own experience) that what one does for a living might influence which conferences one attends. For example, once I stopped working directly with Teacher Education, I stopped attending conferences focused specifically on Teacher Education--not because of a lack of interest but a lack of day-to-day relevance. I also suspected that how one pays for conference attendance influences which conferences someone might attend. Finally, after sending this brief survey out to ITForum, I feared that I might get skewed results based on ITForum's membership. As a result, I sent the google

form out to two different AERA lists, two different EDUCAUSE lists, an AECT list, tweeted about it, as well as posted it on a number of LinkedIn groups (including ISPI, ASTD, and elearning guild).

I was delighted to see that 140 people responded (though a few of them did not complete all of the questions). So let's look at what people had to say.

**Question 1: I consider myself a...**

Our field of instructional design and technology is very broad with individuals doing all sorts of things (see Lowenthal & Wilson, 2010; Lowenthal, Wilson, & Parrish, 2009). In fact, people have questioned whether we should even think of ourselves as a “field.” I wanted to get a snapshot of what each person did day-to-day.

The question was set up so that respondents could select more than one choice. The majority of the respondents consider themselves “educational technologists / instructional technologists” (60), followed next by “instructional designers” (40), “professors” (30), and “eLearning professionals” (26). While I was primarily interested simply in what conferences people attend, it was still interesting seeing how people think about what they do day-to-day. For instance, a surprising small number of people think of themselves as instructional developers whereas the largest group considered themselves “educational technologists / instructional technologists.”

Table 2  
*Question One Results*

<b>Position / Duty</b>	<b># of Responses</b>	<b>%</b>
Educational technologist / instructional technologist	60	46%
Instructional designer	40	23%
Professor of instructional design and technology	30	23%
eLearning professional	26	20%
Graduate student	18	14%
Human performance technology professional	10	8%
Instructional developer	10	8%
Trainer	6	5%

**Questions 2: I regularly attend the following conference(s) / professional meeting(s)**

This question really gets at the heart of my concern--which is, where are other educational technology professionals congregating? Which conferences are they attending? I tried to list all of the main conferences that I could think of (though in hindsight I am surprised that I failed to list SALT, WCET, Professors of Instructional Design and Technology or one of the two main learning sciences conferences) but I still left an option for “other”--recognizing that there are many local or international conferences that I am not aware of.

Not surprising given the groups I asked, AECT was selected the most by 50 of the respondents followed by EDUCAUSE with 33 and AERA with 32 respondents (see Table 3).

A few things stood out to me when looking at the results.

- While AECT was selected the most, there wasn't exactly a clear winner. AECT was only selected by 36% of the respondents.
- AERA, Sloan-C, EDUCAUSE, ISTE, SITE, and the Annual Distance Ed conference were all selected about the same. I was particularly surprised that more people did not select ISTE. While I have only attended ISTE once, it has a huge yearly conference and a large membership. It could simply be that the places I posted the survey as well as the time of the year (the end of the K-12 school year) led many educational technology professionals who work directly in K-12 not to respond.
- When looking at "other" conferences people attend (i.e., one's I wasn't aware of or didn't think to list), there wasn't much commonality. Blackboard World, Moodle Moots, and WCET were listed by a few respondents but those were the only ones mentioned by more than two respondents.

Table 3  
*Total Conference Attendance*

<b>Conferences</b>	<b># of Responses</b>	<b>%</b>
AECT	50	36%
EDUCAUSE	33	24%
AERA	32	23%
Sloan-C	30	21%
SITE	28	20%
ISTE	27	19%
Annual Distance Ed	27	19%
ELI	24	17%
E-Learn	18	13%
Edmedia	13	9%
ASTD	9	6%
ISPI	5	4%

I was curious though if there were other patterns. For instance, I attend AECT and AERA each year. I was curious what others who attend AECT or AERA also attend.

When looking at those who attend AECT, I found that they also attended the following conferences:

- AERA (23)
- ASTD (4)
- ISPI (4)
- Sloan-C (8)
- EDUCAUSE (7)
- ELI (7)

- ISTE (8)
- Edmedia (8)
- E-Learn (10)
- SITE (13)
- Annual Distance Ed (8)

Further, those who attend AERA also attend:

- AECT (23)
- ASTD (2)
- ISPI (4)
- Sloan-C (2)
- EDUCAUSE (3)
- ELI (3)
- ISTE (8)
- Edmedia (3)
- E-Learn (3)
- SITE (9)
- Annual Distance Ed (8)

**Question 3: Typically...**

- My place of employment pays for my conference attendance
- I pay for my conference attendance
- My place of employment pays for part of my conference attendance
- Other:

As mentioned earlier, I was interested in simply getting a feel for how many people receive full or partial funding to attend conferences vs. those who pay out of pocket. A surprising 28 out of 131 people or 21% value conferences enough that they use their own money to attend them.

Table 4  
*Conference Funding*

<b>Who Pays</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Work pays for all of my conference attendance	68	51.9%
Work pays for part of my conference attendance	35	26.7%
I pay for my conference attendance	28	21.4%

**Question 4: Why do you attend these conferences and not others?**

Finally, I was interested in getting a feeling for why people attend certain conferences and not others. For instance, I would love to attend Sloan-C but it often overlaps or is too close to when AECT is each year so I make the choice to attend AECT.<sup>1</sup> Further, I would also like to attend the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning but I find the timing (right before the start of fall semester) difficult. Finally, my research focuses on computer-mediated communication so I would love to attend the International Conference on Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) but most years it is held outside of the U.S., which makes it difficult, given the state of travel budgets.

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<sup>1</sup> In the spirit of full disclosure, I serve as the communications officer for the Division of Distance Learning for AECT. However, even before taking on this service role, AECT has remained in my mind as the most important conference to attend each year given my professional roles, responsibilities and career goals.

I suspect others make similar choices. I tried to identify themes that emerged and when possible provide a quote from a respondent that captures the theme. Ultimately, there seemed to be a number of reasons why people attended (or didn't attend) conferences but some of the most frequent had to do with time, money, and relevance.

#### **Cost**

- "I typically go to what is paid for. I used to pick up a conference or two on my own as well, but K-12 education is really hurting... We're lucky to have jobs and still get a travel budget at all. We haven't had cost-of-living adjustments or raises in 5 years. I just can't afford to pick up anything on my own that's not regional at this point."
- "Time and cost play a big part in which and when I go."

#### **Location**

- "I can't afford vacations so I use conferences as a way to take my family on a vacation. I attend the conference and they play. In the evenings I'm with them. We extend a few days each time as well."

#### **Focus**

- "more practical implementations and not too research focused"
- "I attend the ones that I see as more "academic" rather than practitioner-focused (e.g., EDUCAUSE and ASTD), and the ones that are more "general" rather than specifically K-12 only."

#### **Networking / Socializing Possibilities**

- "I attend AECT for professional networking"

#### **Relevance**

- "Relevance to my job and interest."
- "Have friends that attend many of these"
- "Ultimately, it's what will have the most bang for our buck, if we're presenting, and what's most relevant to what we do. There could be great things going on at SITE or E-Learn but if only one or two sessions are directly relevant, then it's not worth it."

#### **High standards**

- "AECT and AERA have higher standards for submissions and for acceptance of proposals plus the referees who review the proposals are more competent and capable of selecting high quality proposals than at ISPI and ASTD."
- "the best for getting new ideas on the research as well as having high standards for my work, also for networking."

#### **Graduate Student Friendly**

- "seeing other graduate students presenting"
- "My students can present their work at SITE and ELearn"
- "Mostly because the graduate programs I attended were supportive of AECT and now I know several people in the organization."
- "AECT is generally more accessible to me as a graduate student."

#### **Respected**

- "They are the most respected in the field for research. Since I'm a graduate student and pay my own way to conferences, I have to be selective"

- “I needed to pick conferences recognized and supported by the colleges I worked for.”

### **Presenting at Conference**

- “I can only attend if i get an accepted poster or session. EDUCAUSE is the hardest to achieve that”

### **Proceedings Published**

- “Good venues to network with others interested in my research areas. Peer reviewed conference papers, proceedings published.”

### **Service**

- “I’m involved with SIGs”

### **Vendors**

- “Like the school focus and exhibits at ISTE.”

### **Inspiration / innovative ideas**

- “To keep abreast of new innovations in educational technology”

### **Mix group of attendees**

- “I look for industry reputation; diversity of attendees; engaging topics that span research, theory, and practice; opportunities to present or publish.”

### **Size**

- “AERA is a monster, and I get more attendees to my talks there than anywhere else. AECT is smaller and usually affords closer meetings with people whose work I am interested in”
- “I’m basically looking at one large & one small.”
- “AECT is a conference I regularly attend because of the intimate nature, knowing many of the attendees, and the content of the presentations as well as the mission of AECT fits with what I value.”

### **Time**

- “Lack of resources - especially time to attend. I would love to attend more of these, but the university resources are very limited (and being cut further), and we have not replaced professors who have retired, so the time to attend these conferences is impacted, too.”

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I set forth to get a better idea of the conferences other professionals in my field attend. For better or for worse, I find that I am not that different than most of the respondents. I love to attend conferences and I have attended (at least at one time or another) *most* of the conferences that my colleagues have. I, like many of the respondents, have found that if I am presenting I have a better chance of getting the conference paid for by my employer but that typically I can only get 1-2 conferences paid for each year because there simply is not enough funds to attend more. I like to attend conferences that are respected by my employer and give me a chance to network with old and new friends (hence one of the reasons I continue to attend AECT and AERA). And finally, while location isn’t everything, the location of the conference can often heavily influence if I attend a conference in a given year. For instance, if a conference is in my hometown (which doesn’t happen often now that I live in Boise Idaho but did when I lived in Denver) or is a short drive away, I am more likely to attend and convince my employer to cover the registration cost. In fact, a couple of years ago, I was able to attend the Professors of Instructional Design and Technology (PIDT) annual gathering as a graduate student because it was in Colorado and

just a short drive away; to-date PIDT offers perhaps the best networking opportunities of any conference I have ever attended. Further, if a conference is too far away (e.g., outside of the U.S.) and cost prohibitive or in less appealing city or a city I have been to too many times (e.g., Orlando), I am also not likely to attend.

This paper started with a simple question, “which conferences do my colleagues attend?” While I was hoping that there might be a clear “winner,” it appears that one size doesn’t fit all. We are a diverse group of individuals who often do similar yet very different things day-to-day, which is likely why we have so many different conferences to attend. For the unforeseeable future (or as long as I can get funding), I will continue to attend AECT and AERA. However, I hope to continue to branch out every few years and check out other conferences—which Sloan-C, the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning and the International Conference on Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning are top on my list—while also finding time to attend PIDT. It is through branching out that I can continue to broaden my professional base and network with other educational technology professionals outside of my immediate circles.

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## Bio

Patrick Lowenthal is an instructional designer at Boise State University. His research focuses on social and teaching presence as well as problems of practice related to post-secondary education. Patrick completed his Ph.D. and MA in Instructional Design and Technology at the University of Colorado Denver.