

Title: Lessons from the 6th World Environmental Education Congress, Brisbane, 2011

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Abstract: The 6th World Environmental Education Congress (WEEC) was held in Brisbane, Australia, in July 2011. This article reflects on key features, highlights and success factors, in particular the efforts to host an eco-responsible event and to use social media to build a sense of community before, during and after the Congress. Lessons learnt from hosting an international event of this scale are shared in order to inform potential conference and congress hosts and organisers, as well as the environmental and sustainability education community, about ways in which to improve the eco-responsibility and ongoing delegate engagement of conferences.

Introduction

The first WEEC was held in Portugal in 2003 with subsequent events in Brazil, Italy, South Africa, Canada and Australia. A biennial event, the WEEC is an important feature on the environmental and sustainability education calendar with increasing attendance and impact (Jickling, 2010). The WEECs are designed to be accessible to all individuals and organisations in the field including universities, public institutions, non-governmental organisations, schools, parks, professional associations, research centres and businesses. 677 delegates from 49 countries attended the 6th WEEC in Brisbane, Australia and shared experiences, devised new projects, expanded networks, and built a sense of community.

The Congress Theme: Explore, Experience, Educate

The 6th WEEC was convened by an local and international environmental and sustainability educators in partnership with the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) and the WEEC Secretariat. The program included four days of plenaries, papers, roundtables, symposiums, workshops, posters, field trips, exhibitions, shared meals and a congress dinner. Congress themes addressed research, policy, pedagogy, change, outdoor education, indigenous perspectives, climate change, the Asia-Pacific, early childhood and youth.

Congress Highlights

The 6th WEEC made a concerted effort to be an eco-responsible event and to utilize social media to build a sense of community. Our efforts in each of these areas are outlined in more detail below.

Eco Responsibility

The organising committee was clear from the onset that the 6th WEEC should attempt to 'walk the talk'. To this end, a sub-committee, led by Erin Lloyd, was established to ensure that eco-responsibility was considered at every stage of the 6th WEEC journey. Three key principles underpinned all planning and decision-making:

1. Minimising the ecological footprint of the Congress and its participants;
2. Meeting environmental and sustainability education objectives including awareness-raising, building knowledge and skills, encouraging collaboration, and influencing actions; and
3. Conserving and enhancing the local environment of South East Queensland.

The 6th WEEC 'walked the talk' by committing to a fully vegetarian, locally-sourced menu for all Congress meals and events along with a process of ecological waste management. The CO₂ emissions from venue utilities, catering, delegate travel and delegate accommodation were measured and reported on in the closing session of the Congress. The conference venue played a central role in aiding us to reduce emissions and in measuring emissions from the venue (including energy, water and waste). Delegate travel and accommodation were calculated using data provided in the final evaluation. Based on these calculations, we offset 45 tonnes of CO₂ through a local green energy project.

We were very conscious that the environmental impact of an international event of this scale is not restricted to the choices of the organising committee but also the choices of all congress participants including delegates, exhibitors, suppliers, venue and support personnel. The eco-responsibility sub-committee therefore invited and challenged all participants in the Congress to play an active role in helping us to meet our eco-responsibility goals. This was encouraged through comprehensive eco-responsibility information on the 6th WEEC website, in the program guide and in the exhibitors guide, with a prize also awarded to the exhibitor that best met the guidelines for green exhibitions we had developed. In the closing ceremony, Erin Lloyd provided feedback to delegates on the savings and achievements made. In hindsight, a presentation outlining our eco-responsibility strategies at the start of the Congress would have provided an additional educational opportunity and may have led to greater changes in delegate and exhibitor behaviour.

There were a number of educational aspects to our efforts to be eco-responsible, including the sharing of information and structures to facilitate behaviour change in relation to responsible and sustainable travel; offsetting carbon emissions; limiting resource and energy consumption and limiting waste; and information on protecting Australia's biodiversity.

Social Media

The 6th WEEC also made a concerted effort to utilise the opportunities for both promotion and engagement offered by social media. Our social media sub-committee was led by Hilary Macleod. She also presented a paper on social media strategies at the Congress (Macleod, 2011). The key goal was to engage with delegates and facilitate conversations and networks before, during and after the Congress in an effort to reduce the 'one-off' experience that most of us have of conferences.

In seeking to achieve our social media goals, linked Twitter (www.twitter.com/weec2011) Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/WEEC2011-World-Environmental-Education-Congress/122270651132308>) and Ning accounts (the NING is no longer active) were established. These sites and the Congress hashtag (#weec2011) were promoted before and throughout the event. There was significant activity in the lead up to the event with over 450 'likes' on Facebook and 81 followers on Twitter before commencement of the Congress. The Ning site was the least utilised of the three sites, leading to a decision post-Congress to shut down the site. The sites were primarily used prior to the Congress to share information, connect with other delegates and arrange billets. The sites also provided a space through which to promote the Congress and its activities.

During the Congress itself, both the Twitter and Facebook sites were well used. As part of the closing session, photos taken throughout the Congress were streamed using Twitterfountain, where event photos stored on Flickr were combined with live tweets.

Following the Congress, the conversation has continued through a new #weec13 hashtag on Twitter. The WEEC2011 Facebook page is also still active, with likes increasing (now over 550). The Facebook page is now used by delegates to share information about events and issues of interest to environmental and sustainability educators. With regard to the social media initiatives of the 6th WEEC, we learnt that there is a great opportunity to extend the learning of conferences through extending the conversation both before and after such events.

Delegate Reflections

In addition to the anecdotal feedback given to the Congress organisers throughout and after the event, the delegates were sent a formal survey at the conclusion of the Congress. Included in this survey were 23 questions about the Congress experience, as well as questions that would assist with measuring the environmental impact of the delegates' attendance at the congress. Approximately 37% of delegates (253 respondents) completed the survey. Relevant findings for this paper include:

1. Overall the Congress was: **excellent (45%), good (42%),** average (9%), fair (3%), poor (1%)
2. The catering was: **excellent (50%), good (29%),** average (11%), fair (7%), poor (3%)
3. The Congress organisation was: **excellent (51%), good (39%),** average (7%), fair (2%), poor (1%)
4. The networking opportunities were: **excellent (65%),** average (31%), poor (4%)
5. Please rate the sustainable practices of the Congress relative to other conferences you have attended: **significantly leading (39%), somewhat leading (40%),** on par (17%), somewhat lagging (3%), significantly lagging (1%)

Overall, the feedback from the congress was resoundingly positive, with many accounts of good outcomes and experiences shared through the survey. In relation to the concerns of this paper, delegates identified the vegetarian, locally-sourced menu, the lack of bottled water, and the use of social media as significant achievements of the Congress.

Key Lessons

In reflecting on the 6th WEEC, there are a number of insights to be gained in terms of what was done well and what could have been done differently or improved. The power of hindsight can be put to good use in this instance by sharing such lessons with others in the environmental and sustainability education community who may be considering hosting an event or conference. Issues to consider include:

For the 6th WEEC, eco-responsibility guided the planning and execution of the event. We discovered the importance of using venues and suppliers who both shared and supported our vision and goals. For example, the venue we selected shared and understood our efforts to be eco-responsible and was pivotal in ensuring the success of these. Not only was the venue able to meet our goal of a fully vegetarian, locally-sourced menu, they also provided a space for meals that facilitated conversations between delegates. We did not supply bottled water and encouraged delegates to bring their own re-useable water bottles and use the water fountains located throughout the venue. We believe that such highly visible initiatives enabled us to match the practical requirements of hosting an event of this size with the values of, and objectives for, the event. Through such initiatives, we were able to demonstrate to delegates our authenticity and intentions and set an eco-responsibility tone for the event. Educationally, we know from the delegate feedback survey that these initiatives generated much discussion, especially about the environmental benefits of a locally-sourced vegetarian diet.

What we learnt from our efforts to utilise social media is that many delegates are already actively using social media and were pleased to be able to use these forums during the Congress. As organisers, we learnt that someone does have to take responsibility for keeping the conversation going, however, this need not be an onerous task. We believe that social media provides a unique, cost-effective, and easily available means of facilitating and encouraging conversations between delegates before, during and after conferences and, if not used, is a missed opportunity to educate.

In conclusion ...

The organisers of 6th WEEC hope that the lessons shared in this paper will be of use to others in the environmental and sustainability education field planning or considering hosting an event. We encourage the use of a range of eco-responsible measures to ensure that we begin to minimize the environmental impact of hosting face-to-face meetings and events. We also encourage the use of social media, particularly in beginning and continuing learning and conversations beyond the actual event. The 7th World Environmental Education Congress will be held in Morocco in June 2013 - <http://www.weec2013.org/>

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