

Online conferences: an in-depth example of getting value for you and your team

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With Dr Wendy Bamford, Principal at Wānaka Primary School



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CORE Education's [Deep Learning Lab](#) (DLL), held during the recent school break, provided many New Zealand educators with their first opportunity to experience a fully online conference.

Normally a two-day event in a physical location somewhere in New Zealand, this year the decision was made to take the event online, given the concerns about travel in a COVID-19 environment.

One of the schools in the New Zealand New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) project is Wānaka Primary School (WPS). While staff had been a part of DLLs before, travel and

accommodation costs from Wānaka to the venue often meant that only a small team could afford to attend.

This year Dr Wendy Bamford, principal of the school, saw an opportunity to involve more staff. In this interview she describes how this worked for her and her staff.

Derek: Kia ora Wendy, thanks for taking the time to chat about your experiences of the virtual Deep Learning Lab this year. Describe for me a little of what you thought when you heard this year's event was going to be held online?

Wendy: Well, it would be fair to say that the Wānaka Primary School staff, especially the very ancient principal [smiles], approached the whole thing with a degree of skepticism. We'd enjoyed being a part of the previous Labs, and got a lot from them. With this one being online we were wondering how could an online conference work so that we were able to network, share ideas, interact with presenters and have our pedagogical beliefs challenged, so that we got the most out of it that we could?

Derek: And what was the verdict?

Wendy: The very ancient principal has eaten her hat! It was amazing and thoroughly worthwhile was the WPS verdict. And given it was two days of inversion layer and a max temperature of two degrees, I for one was glad I could benefit from quality PLD without leaving my fireside chair.

Derek: How about the programme – how did that compare with the face to face conferences you'd attended previously?

Wendy: We were delighted with the quality of presenters, both national and global, who presented at the DLL. We were also delighted that the DLL catered for all levels of understanding and experience around NPDL. There was something for everyone and as the insights and live presentations were recorded, teachers could go back and look at all of the keynotes and workshops if they needed to.

Derek: How did you choose which teachers could attend this year?

Wendy: We didn't have to choose – everyone who wanted to attend could! Usually we can only afford to send three to four teachers to the DLL and uLearn because of the high costs involved in travel...usually flights for us...and accommodation. We were able to encourage staff to attend as they had access to the DLL with only the registration fee as the cost and in the holidays so no reliever costs involved. We had a large number register.

Derek: What about those with family or other commitments who may have wanted to attend but couldn't?

Wendy: One of my teachers was unable to attend the Thursday/Friday of the actual conference but hopped in and out as she could prior to and after the actual online date.

Derek: So the flexibility of online really opened it up for everyone?

Wendy: It certainly did! A number of my staff have young families and that is another benefit of accessing the conference online from their homes.

Derek: As principal, what were the big benefits you saw in having the event available to your staff like this?

Wendy: After attending the DLL, staff have high expectations of fabulous PLD at their fingertips without the hours in airports and staying away from the family. Bringing high quality global presenters in remotely allows greater numbers and greater varieties of insights and keynotes. It's also more affordable, as the costs of hosting the speakers – their flights to NZ, accommodation etc. must be a lot less as well, meaning registration costs and the costs to CORE are reduced.

Derek: Tell me more about how your staff actually participated – did you all just sit at home in front of the fire and go online?

Wendy: There were a number of ways staff attended the DLL. We had a group of staff who were able to gather together at school, either in the staffroom or as a pod group, but we also have staff who live up to 45 minutes from school and they loved the option of not having to travel and to watch it from home. There was lots of communication between staff whether it was conversations held at school or digital means.

Derek: That sounds awesome – something in there for everyone! And I love the way you have used the conference to create a sense of 'connectedness' among your staff – regardless of how they participated.

Wendy: Yes, that was very intentional. On the first week back after the DLL all of the WPS staff gathered together and talked about the ideas and pedagogical practices that resonated with them. This stimulated further discussions and many are now keen to go back and look at presentations again as teams etc. as well.

Derek: So being online really suited you and your staff?

Wendy: Indeed – the major benefits I see are that more staff can be involved, a greater number and variety of presenters can also be involved and you can interact in a space and at a time that suits you.

Derek: So this experience has really changed your thinking about online conferences! Do you think your staff will be interested in participating like this again?

Wendy: Absolutely! Before the Deep Learning Lab I had only one teacher interested in attending uLearn and to be honest our PLD budget could only afford to send three or four. Now that staff have had a taste of the online DLL and the fact that it ran so smoothly, people could opt into sessions at times that suited them. There are a number who would like to be involved with the online uLearn conference.

Derek: What was it about the experience that made it so engaging for your staff? It sounds like it was much more than simply a series of 'talking heads' providing online keynotes and workshops?

Wendy: That's it exactly. The opportunity to engage in the online forums, in breakout rooms, interact with the keynote presenters, insights and live presenters and the ability to revisit these at any time or enter into another insight and consequent forum ensured there is lots of thinking, discussion, rigorous questioning. We found at the DLL that staff newer to DLL

revelled in the practical classroom ideas, resources and speakers, while the more informed and experienced practitioners looked for something to challenge their thinking and disrupt their beliefs.

Derek: So they're keen to get to uLearn now?

Wendy: I can't wait for uLearn ... and I can bet on the fact there will be a large number of WPS staff as well. If uLearn is set up like the DLL it will be the ideal portal for everyone from beginning teachers to experienced school leaders!

Derek: Thanks for your time, Wendy. I'll look forward to catching up at uLearn online.



Derek Wenmoth

[Derek Wenmoth](#) is a Principal Consultant at CORE Education. He has been involved with CORE since its inception in 2003. With a background as a teacher, principal, teacher educator and education policy advisor, Derek's role at CORE, perfectly combines his passion for teaching and learning together with his long-held fascination with the use of technologies in education. He coordinates the development of CORE's annual Ten Trends that are widely referenced by educators and educational leaders.