

Cyberwork

The irony of attending conferences to discuss virtual work!

Kate Anthony

The bringing together of professional minds at conferences is one of the joys of our work. Conferences offer us learning opportunities, a networking event, and usually an element of socialising. Counselling can sometimes be a solitary way of working, and conferences allow us to diminish that somewhat and spread our wings a little.

However, at almost every conference I present at, someone points out the irony in travelling hundreds of miles to discuss being present virtually! This was certainly the case at the recent BACP Practitioners' Conferences in London and Leeds, where I gave a presentation on what you need to know about taking counselling and coaching services online.

Both were thoroughly enjoyable and successful events. They also gave me pause for thought on how we can blend technologies to attend conferences as well as how we can use technology to offer services to clients. One of the more recent initiatives that BACP has taken is to explore further the concept of conferences being available both 'in-room' and virtually – the annual Online Counselling and Therapy in Action (OCTIA) is a good example of this. Delegates attend the actual venue (usually in Bristol) and are also in attendance (usually in their homes) to watch a live stream of presentations and interviews over the internet, while holding discussions live in a chat room next to the video stream.

At a previous OCTIA conference in Manchester, I was able to present to a room of delegates at the venue, with my laptop in front of me. Broadcast behind me on a screen was the view from my laptop perspective into the virtual environment of Second Life, where I was joined by colleagues from all over the world, represented as avatars, who had their own chat facility with me via my laptop, plus the delegates in the room, who were also in Second Life as avatars from their own laptops. On another screen on the wall on my right was where I was shown live from the perspective of one of the other delegates in the room in Second Life, with the official OCTIA chat room

being scrolled to the right of the video, where I was also taking part via audio and my laptop via text.

If that description sounds confusing, the crucial point is that I was *present in five different realities simultaneously, presenting worldwide*. This groundbreaking event reached four continents – Europe, the USA/Canada, South America and Australia – bringing them together to discuss the use of virtual and mixed realities in counselling and psychotherapy *experientially*. Just attempting to explain that experience to you is messing with my head – actually designing it and doing it live was truly extraordinary, and an achievement I am immensely proud of, as are my colleagues at OnlineEvents.co.uk who managed the technological side of it all.

So, in your professional capacity, are you and your workplace taking advantage of technology for your continuing professional development? Organisations are increasingly offering live streaming and chat as an alternative way of travelling to and attending live conferences with the cost only being your time and your internet connection; or offering discounted prices for virtual attendance. Attending remotely is certainly a different experience from being there in person (and conversely much more exhausting somehow), but blended attendance at conferences is increasingly becoming the norm.

Online conferencing is something my students get introduced to at an early stage of their course, to enable them to take full advantage of what is on offer for their learning from the comfort of their sofa. I also encourage students to attend live conferences where possible, as I believe that professional human interaction taking place both online and offline is what makes us rounded practitioners as the internet plays a bigger and bigger part in our lives and work.

I loved being in Leeds and London to meet, talk and learn with my colleagues, just as I love being online in a chat room as part of a computer mediated event. Both ways of attending conferences are nourishing to us

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as practitioners, and each has its own nuances on how interaction with each other and the speakers takes place – neither better than the other. In fact, I think the main difference in having an experience of good quality is that the lunch tends to be better if physically present at the venue!



Dr Kate Anthony, FBACP has trained practitioners and organisations worldwide in online therapy and related fields and is a Fellow of BACP. She is co-founder of the Online Therapy Institute and Managing Editor of TILT Magazine (Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology).
www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com