Overcoming Challenges of ISAD Online Conferences 1998-2012

First published 2017 by Judith Kuster

About the Author: Judith Kuster CCC-SLP, BCSF-R, M.S. in speech-language pathology and M.S. in counseling, is an ASHA Fellow and emeritus professor of Communication Disorders at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She has maintained the Stuttering Home Page (http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster/stutter.html) for the past 22 years (starting as a Gopher site) and put together the ISAD online conferences from 1998-2012. Kuster is a member of the ASHA Special Interest Group #4: Fluency and Fluency Disorders and the International Stuttering Association. She is the recipient of the two Fulbright Specialist Awards (Bulgaria 2007 and China 2010) and has presented on fluency disorders nationally and Internationally. She was awarded the ASHF DiCarlo Award for Outstanding Clinical Achievement, the 2003 IFA Distinguished Contributor Award, the 2007 ISA Outstanding Contribution Award, the 2008 ASHA Distinguished Contributor Award, in 2009 was named to the National Stuttering Association's Hall of Fame, the 2009 MSU, Mankato Global Citizen Award, and Bethany Lutheran College 2017 Alumna of the Year.

Although I had help and advice over the years, especially from tech support at my university, there were many challenges for basically one person to manage the ISAD online conferences.

Challenges with presenters and participants

A statement posted each year read *"Contributors to the conference are solely responsible for the information they provide. We cannot be responsible for nor can we attest to the accuracy or efficacy of the information others provide."* When papers were submitted consumers or presenters were asked to revise some ideas about stuttering, therapy, interactions, etc. that were considered inappropriate. Advertising was typically not allowed.

When lengthy back and forth on the threaded discussions became heated or was considered unresolvable, it was either moved to a new threaded discussion where the individuals could continue to "discuss." In one instance, it was stopped and deleted which precipitated email threats

of writing to my department chair, of contacting my dean and university president, and even of bringing legal action. Upon consulting with university legal advisors I was told not to worry about it. Another statement was added on the front page of all conferences: *Please ask questions that are relevant to the papers and refrain from developing a personal topic. It is expected that participants will remain cordial. The coordinator of the conference retains the right to delete posts considered inappropriate.*

I often functioned as an editor. At times presenters requested revisions in their papers after the conference was already online. I made them. A few presenters were asked to revise excessively long papers. Occasionally presenters did not respond to comments as they had been requested to do. With personal "encouragement" they eventually responded. Over the years, more and more consumers (PWS) and professionals asked to write a conference paper or submitted one that was not invited. Some requested several years in a row. We discussed their ideas which were usually accommodated if there was still room, trying to keep a balance between consumers and professionals, U.S. and international presenters, and male and female presenters. If the topic was very controversial or divisive I generally negotiated a less controversial approach or the individual withdrew the request.

Several presenters from outside the US requested help getting their paper into English. Google Translate could handle materials that arrived in German, Spanish, and French. For several papers that arrived in English it was advisable to adjust the wording. In both cases it was necessary to send my reworded understanding of the author's meaning back and forth several times for final approval.

Challenges with technology

I did not have software in 1998 to format papers easily so I formatted the conferences using basic html – something I continued to do. Several papers had tables, foreign symbols, and other challenges that required additional learning. I had requested turning off the "smart quotes," not using page numbers or footnotes, etc. If those requests were not followed, additional work was required. Over the years I learned a lot!

Several papers were very challenging to format for online presentation. I had developed a basic template and requested people to send papers in Microsoft Word format but occasionally received papers in Word Perfect, ClarisWorks, and other formats that even my campus computer center could not open. I finally asked the author to send the paper as an email. Twice I was sent graphics from other countries that were very difficult; one came in two parts I was expected to combine, but neither could be opened. Again the computer center worked for several hours finding a program that would open them and kindly created a single jpeg.

The biggest challenge was with the threaded discussions (TDs).

I was using Microsoft Front Page for MAC to create the TDs. The first challenge was learning how to create TDs; this wasn't difficult, but managing them was time consuming and at times challenging. Early posting attempts were confusing for both presenters and visitors. Although I furnished instructions for how to post and how to respond and also provided a practice TD which presenters and consumers were encouraged to use, frequent mistakes were made that I was

requested to "fix" including double posts, typos, additional information the author wished to add, posts presenters wished to replace, etc. In learning how to manage the TDs, when I would erase a double posting I accidentally broke the connection to post future posts in the early conferences. All of the posts were still in a cache, they just weren't posting. To fix it I had to create a new TD attached to several papers, and by transfer by hand numerous prior threads. This typically took several hours.

The first year the TDs were on a dedicated college server that would crash, sometimes several times/day. I learned how to reboot the server and could do that when I was on campus, but my home is 30 miles from my university and I had to enlist an on-campus person who was willing to reboot the server if it crashed at night or on the weekend. A faculty friend was a lifesaver several times that year. Eventually the TDs were moved to a much more dependable server that solved this problem.

In early conferences some individuals were unable to use the TDs for various reasons. They would download papers or I would send them a CD with all of the papers. They would email me their questions which I would post for them, and then relay any response to their personal email.

The Microsoft TDs were entirely open to anyone. In recent years, spammers found them and not only did I need to fix typos and double posts, but also had to monitor each threaded discussion carefully several times a day for spam that often advertised some pretty disgusting porn sites as well as jewelry, designer purses, drugs, etc. My university blocked the spammers for a day or two, but they always re-appeared from a new IP address.

Several people complained when, due to a change in the software, a line space between paragraphs in the TDs was no longer allowed. The first software I used was for MAC and it allowed a line space between paragraphs. MS chose not to update the original MAC software version, and so in 2004 I had to switch to the PC version of Microsoft which did not have that feature in its TD software. I needed a way to access Windows on my MAC, and learned how to do that using BootCamp. As I corresponded with an unhelpful Microsoft about all this, I was informed that they did not plan to support Front Page for Windows machines anymore either, so there was concern about how long I'd be able to use this TD format. The handwriting was on the wall for when I would no longer coordinate an ISAD online conference.

Although in 2012 I received a note from a highly respected professor and researcher ("You have reached a point where this event has become such a great annual success, it would be highly unethical of you just contemplating to stop organizing it ☺)," my university would no longer support the outdated and potentially virus-prone Microsoft Front Page program. I had retired from teaching in 2010 and decided it was time to retire from doing the online conferences as well. After completing 15 ISAD online conferences and one International Cluttering Conference, my last conference was in 2012.

The following year the International Stuttering Association graciously and competently took over the ISAD online conferences.

Challenges with expectations

Although feedback on the conferences was generally very positive, the internet was quickly evolving in sophistication and many people wanted enhanced features: videos, SKYPE sessions, video meetings, a place where participants could store email addresses, etc. I was concerned to keep the conferences from becoming too "technical" because people in developing countries where there is not very good internet access were still using internet cafes, which cost them money, and could gain more from a plain text presentation that they could download and read off-line. With an eye on my university's requirements and server space, and aware of my chronic challenges with new technology, I did learn how to accommodate some enhancements: narrated PPTs, a Skype session, videos, music, photos of presenters, graphics, and links to PDFs that I could legally include on my server without violating copyright. I always resisted adding hot links that would take readers away from the conference site.

Challenges with the threaded discussion have been noted above, and several people complained about it. I was unable to find a suitable freely-available substitute. Occasionally there was a comment I could easily accommodate, sometimes the following year (e.g. "I don't like the color on the background of the threaded discussions").

There were a few complaints about the acronym ISAD with suggestions how I should change it. "I not SAD. ISAD gives the wrong connotation. By interchanging the last two words of International Stuttering Awareness Day you lose nothing except an undesirable inference given by the bad acronym the organizers chose." I had not chosen this name for the day; the acronym for "International Stuttering Awareness Day" was well-established and I explained it was not mine to change.

Challenges with getting the word out

Each year I worried about having a big party and nobody would come! Some years I contacted the chair of every Communication Disorders program to pass on information to their faculty teaching courses or supervising therapy for stuttering, encouraging them to including the online course in classes or with student clinicians. Several professors (including me) required student participation. Over the years I sent press releases to ASHA, the Stuttering Foundation, FRIENDS, the National Stuttering Association, individual NSA chapters, the International Stuttering Association and the International Fluency Association. I also contacted many individual international stuttering support groups. Several of them put the ISAD conference logo and information on their web pages. More information about how the online conferences were advertised was listed on a threaded discussion one year at http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/cahn_mnsu_edu/5isadcomments/_disc38/00000002.html

Challenges with legal issues

In addition to the threat of legal action mentioned above, one author threatened that they would sue if a paper was not removed, because of a disagreement between two parties about copyright and trademark issues. It was resolved with extensive communication between the two parties with revisions in the paper negotiated by the conference coordinator. The paper remained during the conference and is still archived.

Challenges with conference themes and logos/posters

Conference Posters 1998-2012

Each year there were several suggestions for a conference theme. It was always my goal to be sure the theme reflected both a consumer and professional perspective; the stated purpose of International Stuttering Awareness Day was "to promote awareness and understanding and to show appreciation for people who stutter and the speech language professionals who work with them." Sometimes I was successful, but not always. In some years a professional developed the conference logo after the theme had been announced. A few times, no logo (poster) was developed so I designed something that I hoped would be acceptable. A favorite was the poster/logo for the 2010 online conference developed by my husband and me: "People who stutter inspire." It has survived the test of time and still appears occasionally on individuals' websites.

Current Challenges

Twice I have been requested, after many years, to remove items from various papers. One individual whose audio was linked to another site, requested it be unlinked. The paper had other links and I could accommodate the request while maintaining the value of the paper.

Another individual asked that any information identifying her be deleted. She had participated in many of the conferences and we negotiated that any time her name appeared I would substitute her initials. Other challenges occurred with updates in technology. My university retired two servers, one where all the TDs and a second where all of the audios and videos resided. They asked me to update all TDs for all conferences (a huge job) before they were transferred to the main university server. With wonderful technical support from my university I was helped to revise all the links and move audios and videos to another server. Several audios had been put online in both a PC and MAC version. The PC software used to access them had been "upgraded" and was no longer functioning, so I needed to eliminate all those links from many papers.

Future "updates" in technology scare me!

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Comments

Overcoming Challenges of ISAD Online Conferences 1998-2012 (Judith Kuster) — **9 Comments**

1. Bruce on October 4, 2017 at 9:34 am said:

   Thanks for sharing all this Judy, technology still scares me a little too…there always seems to be solutions to most issues but often they come with their own price…often not quite delivering what is needed or creating 'quirks' that need to be managed.

   I concur with many of the challenges you have explained and that the process is always evolving and always means new challenges, I'm not sure that will ever change.

   Thank you for your advice and support, it is always most welcome!

   o Judy on October 4, 2017 at 5:04 pm said:

      The latest conference appears to be going well and the layout is lovely. Congratulations. You seem to be managing all the potential challenges very well, especially when people follow directions:-) Sorry – in a reply on another paper, I thing I just posted a reply but it may appear as a comment to the paper;-(If I made mistake it can probably be fixed, but don't bother. It will probably appear right beneath Scott's comment unless there was another comment that hadn't been vetted. Is there a way to change "Leave a Reply" to "Post a Comment or a Question" for the original box below the paper and to enlarge the "Reply" in the other box? Or am I still confused. It really doesn't matter. If I made a mistake, I won't do it again;-)

      ▪ ISA on October 6, 2017 at 11:46 pm said:

         Hi Judy, don't worry, in WordPress there are many plugins that can fix all sorts of issues. I've just spent an hour reviewing all comments and threading and updated those comments into or out of the right threads. I'm sure you had this problem many times. I like to think there's always a solution to any technical problem, it just depends how hard you need to look to find the perfect solution.

         ▪ Judy on October 7, 2017 at 1:17 pm said:

Thanks ISA:-) You're a better techie than I am!

- Bruce on October 14, 2017 at 12:03 am said:

Oops, forgot to update my name on that post. Sometimes added value from technical complexity can be both a blessing and a curse ☺

2. Hanan Hurwitz on October 14, 2017 at 10:53 am said:

Judy. Thanks so much for arranging the ISAD online conference for all those years, and for creating the valuable resource that is the Stuttering Homepage. I appreciate, especially after your explanation, the effort and challenges involved.

Hanan

- Judy on October 14, 2017 at 6:53 pm said:

Bruce and his team are doing an excellent job in carrying out the tradition, and your continuing involvement in so many ways including internationally, is wonderful! Thanks for the kind comments, Hanan. The work for and with the community of people around the world who live with stuttering is in good hands;-) Judy

3. Anita S. Blom on October 23, 2017 at 8:30 am said:

Thanks again for the tremendous work you've done for pws and slps through the online conference. Yuor paper has been very educational to the new team and we hope to come back to you for guidance when needed. You're such an inspiration to me and I love you beyond words.

Hugs

Anita

- Judith Kuster on October 23, 2017 at 11:12 pm said:

Anita, you have been a special friend and inspiration to me and to so many others for many, many years!! I'm still around, but I also know and respect the quality of the work on this conference, as well other things you continue to do to support PWS, even while healing from major surgery on your knee;-) Keep on keeping on, kiddo! I love you, too! Judy

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