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## Conference Review

# Tech Day Plus 2013 Conference- Osaka

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On September 28 I had the pleasure of attending the Tech Day Plus 2013 Conference held at Otemae University, Osaka campus. The event was co-sponsored by the Osaka and Kobe JALT Chapters. The conference was first held in 2005 and has since been held annually except for a one-year hiatus in 2012. This may have contributed to the slightly lower than normal attendance this year, which, according to organizers, is usually 70 to 80 participants.

As the name suggests, the main focus of the conference was workshops introducing new types of technology and how they can be used in and outside of the classroom. More traditional workshops and paper presentations were also available on such topics as classroom management and lesson planning. Buzzwords such as Moodle, Moodle Reader, Evernote, and Wiki Spaces were the focus topics for the day. Although I found all of the new technological jargon to be overwhelming at first, the presenters showed how even the least tech savvy teacher could use many of the showcased Web-based lessons.

From Inano Station, it was only a two-minute walk to the Otemae University's quaint campus where the event was held. Although small, the facilities were adequate for the conference. Arriving early, I found the organizers to be exceptionally friendly and punctual. The classrooms used were conveniently centered on an open courtyard in a two-story horseshoe-shaped building. This made it easy to find and move from one workshop to the next. The courtyard also provided a seating area for participants to chat and share ideas before the

conference started and during the breaks. Furthermore, adjacent to the courtyard was an Oxford University Press representative who had a variety of textbooks at his booth and was on hand to answer questions during the breaks.

The lunchtime recess was short, but fortunately there were plenty of eating establishments nearby. Adjacent to the courtyard was a student shop, which sold cup ramen, and there was a large shopping center with a grocery store and food court that was a 10-minute walk away. Following the conference, organizers arranged a social dinner at a local curry restaurant.

In regards to the facilities, all of the rooms were equipped with projectors and screens at the front. In addition, all of the tech related workshops I attended were in computer labs, which meant that participants not only had access to two computer screens, they could view any PowerPoint slides or “How to” tech related demonstrations both on the main screen at the front or on their individual monitors. This made for a smoother learning experience, as it ensured that all participants could visually follow what was being displayed on the main screen. In some cases, this also gave participants the opportunity to try out the computer programs that had been demonstrated.

The conference had a total of 24 workshops, and I attended seven of them; however, I will only discuss the most prominent four. Dr. Thomas Robb was the keynote speaker for the day. Dr. Robb is a professor at Kyoto Sangyo University and past president of JALT. His years of teaching and presenting experience showed in his easy-going and friendly presentation style. He was well organized, readily answered our questions, and provided attendees with the opportunity to try out one of two programs.

The first program that he introduced attendees to was Moodle Reader (specifically, MReader), a free online reading program that tracks students’ reading progress. Students start by reading a graded reader, then log onto their MReader account and take a ten-question multiple-choice test. The test bank contains tests for more than 3,000 commonly used graded readers from various publishing companies.

Attendees also had the opportunity to test out the program. MReader could benefit students at the upper middle school to university level. The advantages of

this program are that it is free, there is a large test bank, they can use the program at their own pace and time, and it is user friendly. However, the drawbacks include access to graded readers, setting up accounts, and computer access.

Second, he explained Skype, which is a free video and voice-calling program. He has students book time slots, and by using a pre-assigned conversation framework, they talk with partners all over the globe. This program benefits students by giving them the opportunity to practice speaking in addition to being involved in an intercultural exchange. The challenges to the program were the amount of time needed to set it up, financial cost to the students, and ensuring that students remembered their scheduled times.

The third and fourth period workshops illustrated how personalized Web pages could be used to encourage students to work outside of the classroom. The third period presentation was by a college English teacher Ms. Hiroko Sato, who first spoke on the advantages of Evernote over Moodle and secondly how she had used Evernote to extend her lessons outside of the classroom. Her presentation was nicely organized and used well designed PowerPoint slides and charts to outline the pros and cons of each program, which was effective at showing why she preferred Evernote to Moodle. Students could upload their homework, view notes or lecture notes and take tests on Moodle. In contrast, Evernote is limited to storing notes, pictures or to tag other links from the Internet. Using Evernote, Ms. Sato had her students create home pages by assigning individual or group tasks such as writing self-introductions, poems, and uploading voice recordings and pictures.

Next, to increase the effectiveness of lesson plans and further student participation, the speaker demonstrated how she applied Koji Fukuda's (2011) games theory to lessons using Evernote. She clearly outlined how Fukuda's games theory states that an activity should meet six criteria: 1) free choice of participants, 2) a clear goal, 3) small steps, 4) quick and frequent feedback, 5) visualization, and 6) social interaction.

Overall, the workshop was presented in a smooth and well laid out manner and sparked my interest enough to download and try Evernote. However, in part due to time constraints, the presenter did not demonstrate how to use Evernote,

nor did she give any examples of students' work and how they had uploaded the information as the presenter in the fourth workshop did.

The fourth period, following a short lunch break, was a workshop by Mr. Harry Carpet of Matsuyama University. Mr. Carpet showed how a student's language skills can improve through the use of Wiki Spaces. The speaker noted the security advantages of Wiki Spaces over Facebook, as Wiki Spaces' accounts can be set to member-only viewing. After completing similar tasks to Ms. Sato's students, his students did presentations using their Wiki Pages. I found this to be an informative and useful workshop. Although not revolutionary in nature, the workshop was to the point, ran smoothly, and clearly outlined the speaker's points. The presenter effectively used the large screens at the front of the room to provide a step-by-step demonstration of how he had students add pictures, memos, and videos to their individualized web pages. Something the presenter could have done to solidify his point would have been to showcase some of his students' work so that attendees could actually see the results of using Wiki Pages in class.

The final tech-related presenter was Matt Luca, a full-time lecturer at Kansai University, who focused on teaching TOEFL through Moodle. Mr. Luca did a great job of explaining the general concept of how he had used Moodle to improve students' TOEFL scores. This included a chart with students' test scores before and after his course. Furthermore, he also outlined the advantages to the program. These included the fact that students worked outside the classroom, feedback was given instantaneously as students' work was forwarded to teachers' smart phones, and progress was tracked. The speaker also noted the success of the online testing program built into the Moodle program, which simulates the real TOEFL electronic test. Since implementing the program, he found that students were better prepared for studying abroad. Although he acknowledged experiencing difficulties setting up Moodle, these were outweighed by its many advantages.

Given the limited amount of time the presenter did a good job of providing information about how he had implemented Moodle in his class and some of the ways it could be effective in improving students' TOEFL scores. However,

he did not demonstrate the program or how he had overcome some of the major difficulties. This left participants with an idea of what the program could do, but little idea of what the program actually looked like or how to use it. In the future, it would be advisable to give a quick demonstration of the program, especially for those who are viewing it for the first time.

To conclude, Tech Day Plus proved to be a worthwhile event, which I recommend to teachers looking to improve the impact of their classroom activities. The presentations introduced an assortment of new and innovative ways to use technology, both inside and outside of the classroom. My only recommendation, after my years in Japan, is to hold a short closing ceremony to thank everybody for coming, thus providing a feeling of closure for the day. Overall, this conference was a solid event that taught participants new ways to motivate students, while stimulating teachers to try new things.

## References

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In this issue, we welcome the conference review written by Shaun Iwasawa. He is a recipient of the New Member Conference Grant and consequently applied his grant to a conference trip. Here, he shares some of his experiences attending the event.