Gasta Goes Global as a Rapid Community Response to COVID-19

Tom Farrelly[1] iD

Gearoid Ó Suilleabháin [2]

Ken McCarthy [3]

[1] **Institute of Technology, Tralee,** tom.farrelly@staff.ittralee.ie

[2] **Cork Institute of Technology,** Gearoid.OSuilleabhain@cit.ie

[3] **Waterford Institute of Technology,** kmmccarthy@wit.ie

Abstract

During the COVID-19 lockdown, a live online event was organised based on a face-to-face presentation format known as 'Gasta'; developed and popularised by one of the authors. With speakers limited to short strictly enforced five-minute presentation; the approach emphasises audience participation, engagement and spontaneity. The organising team embraced the challenge of transitioning this to an online format for what became a high-profile event focusing on the future of education in the context of COVID-19 called 'GastaGoesGlobal'. The event was effectively organised in less than four weeks and was, by any measure, an unalloyed success, demonstrating what can be achieved by a small self-organising group of experienced individuals. This article offers an insight into the technical and operational supports behind an event of this nature, reflecting on what worked well and abstracting a number of key lessons or precepts for similar events.

Keywords: COVID-19, Educational Technology, Gasta, Online Conference.

1. Introduction.

The COVID-19 crisis may very well turn out to be the greatest catalyst for lasting change in global higher education that the sector has seen in many decades. With face-to-face classes cancelled and physical campuses effectively closed, higher education institutes have moved towards what has commonly been termed remote teaching and learning. Institutes that may have made use of e-learning infrastructure such as VLEs or video conferencing systems as a complement to face-to-face classes or for a handful of online programmes, have found

themselves leaning heavily on these technologies to ensure some form of academic continuity. Units, departments and individuals charged with supporting online teaching and learning in a very different context have found themselves providing essential solutions, services, training and direction in response to the sudden and unprecedented move towards everything happening online. Responses covered, perforce, a range of complex issues as institutes tried to quickly develop ways to emulate existing face-to-face processes online but also to leverage new affordances and consider new intersections of pedagogical and technological requirements and practices. Understandably, these emergency responses initially focussed on matters of teaching, learning, assessment, results processing, student support and engagement. However, this paper provides an outline of a rapid response that was borne out of the pandemic but was less about teaching and learning at a micro and meso level and more about providing an international online arena that brought people together to consider the future of online learning in a post COVID-19 world: the Gasta Goes Global event on April the 14th, 2020.

1.1. Background.

As an event, Gasta (the Irish word for fast or quick) began life at the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA) annual conference in 2014 where the intention was to have maximum audience participation as part of a rapid fire five minute (strictly enforced) presentation. The idea was that the audience counted in Irish to start the presentation and if need be, to stop the presenter if they ran out of time. The format has subsequently been incorporated into a number of settings across Ireland, the UK and Canada. The focus of these talks is engagement, spontaneity and fun. Thus, in organising Gasta Goes Global, we were faced with the challenge of preserving the essential qualities of the traditional Gasta while operating in a purely online environment.

1.2. Planning the Event.

By comparison to a typical large-scale face-to-face conference event, the Gasta Goes Global event was organised to a very tight timeline. As an event organised in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it really needed to be planned, promoted and delivered quickly or risk losing relevance. The original concept for the online event was that it would somehow capture all the fun, engagement and spontaneity of the usual real world Gasta event. This was planned to be a relatively short event of approximately one hour with no need to support parallel sessions or different presentation formats. On the surface therefore it was to be a relatively straightforward single-track online event. However, the event had no funding, and no one formally contracted

to support any aspect of it. While this presented challenges it also meant the organising team was able to operate in a highly agile and flexible way. The COVID-19 crisis led to a significantly increased workload on the EdTech professionals who volunteered to become part of the organising community as all were working at the coalface in their respective institutes. Conversely, everybody was working from home, therefore we were presented with an unparalleled opportunity to recruit a set of people who in the normal course of events would be almost impossible to get together in one event and, especially, at such short notice. The seven presenters (Gastateers) represented a veritable who's who of the EdTech world joining in from the following locations: [Leigh Graves Wolf](USA); [Maha Bali](Egypt) [Sheila MacNeill] (Scotland); [Martin Weller](Wales) [Frank Rennie](Scotland) [Mark Brown] (Ireland) and [Tony Bates] (Canada). In terms of recruitment, the importance of having a link to the [ALT videos] of the 2019 conference Gasta sessions was critical as they provided an opportunity to illustrate what otherwise may have been a somewhat difficult concept to convey.

Once the organising team was recruited there was an early division of key roles that allowed collaborators to work relatively independently which minimised the need for numerous meetings. In order to provide a home for the event a WordPress 5.4-based website was quickly set up and the domain name [gasta.me] was registered. The short easily remembered domain name, coupled with the event website provided a base on which to provide marketing materials and collateral for the event. The website served three distinct though interrelated functions. Firstly, it served as a promotional vehicle that generated and attracted interest in the event; it allowed for speaker profiles and registration and event details to be shared and provided a 'home' for the event where event updates could be directed towards via social media. Taking the registrations in advance allowed the team to work flexibly, gauging demand while, in parallel, working to determine the final arrangements in terms of actually providing access to the event. Secondly, during the event it provided access to the YouTube live stream and also facilitated access to the Twitter, Mentimeter and Instagram channels. Thirdly, after the event it allowed visitors to access the videos and presentations published on a CC BY licence (in keeping with the organiser's commitment to openness) thus enabling the event to have a long-tail impact.

An approximate timeline of key milestones is listed below:

- Initial inquiry email sent to potential speakers: March 17th

- Speakers confirmed: March 18th-24th

- Registration of gasta.me domain name: March 25th

- Creation of initial Gasta website: March 30th

- Date confirmed with all speakers: April 1st

- Development of event poster and associated graphics: April 2nd.

- Registration page complete: April 7th

- Zoom-based practice session for organising group: April 9th

- Promotion of event with "host" institutes: April 9th

- Confirmation email sent to all attendees: April 12th

- Final draft of all arrangement for presenters: April 13th

- Gasta event: April 14th

- Postproduction of speaker videos - published on April 16th #

2. The Event.

At the time that the event was being organised there were increasing levels of negative media attention (Paul, 2020) about the security vulnerabilities of the Zoom video conferencing platform. In this emerging context, a number of speakers had also expressed a degree of concern about the use of the platform. Consequently, a hybrid approach was employed where high levels of engagement and interactivity were achieved across a number of platforms. The decision was ultimately made to provide a relatively small group of trusted individuals along with the organisers and the presenters with access to Zoom Webinar (31 in all), with the remainder of the 411 participants joining via YouTube Live broadcast (from Zoom webinar). Aside from security concerns, a key advantage of this approach was that the organisers did not have to manage too many simultaneous Zoom users and could rely on the commenting feature of YouTube along with other backchannel engagement, in particular via Twitter (#GastaGoesGlobal), to give a sense of participation. A corollary, however, was that a limited number of individuals "inside Zoom" had to create much of the spontaneity and fun of a real world Gasta. That said, all participants regardless of the platform they were on were encouraged to actively take part in the countdown and other high-participation aspects of the event. The complexities of using different platforms and the need to manage the event coherently gave rise to several discrete roles in addition to the Gasta Master (Chair):

- Technical support to manage mic and webcam access as appropriate

- A timekeeper who would warn presenters when their time was nearly up and give the prompt for the chair to lead out all attendees in a final countdown

- Individuals to prompt, moderate and later report back on YouTube comments discussion

- Individuals to prompt, moderate and later report back on Twitter discussion

These roles combined to create a seamless experience for attendees and presenters alike and reduced the cognitive load on the session chair. The initial plan was for a 60-minute session, however, by the time the event finished it had stretched out to 74 minutes. Given the fact that we had seven speakers, multiple counts, two rapporteurs and an impromptu finale song the 14-minute overrun was an illustration that perhaps the original time frame was a little ambitious.

Figure 1: Tweet image of the organising community and the seven speakers, courtesy of @JuliaStephenson.
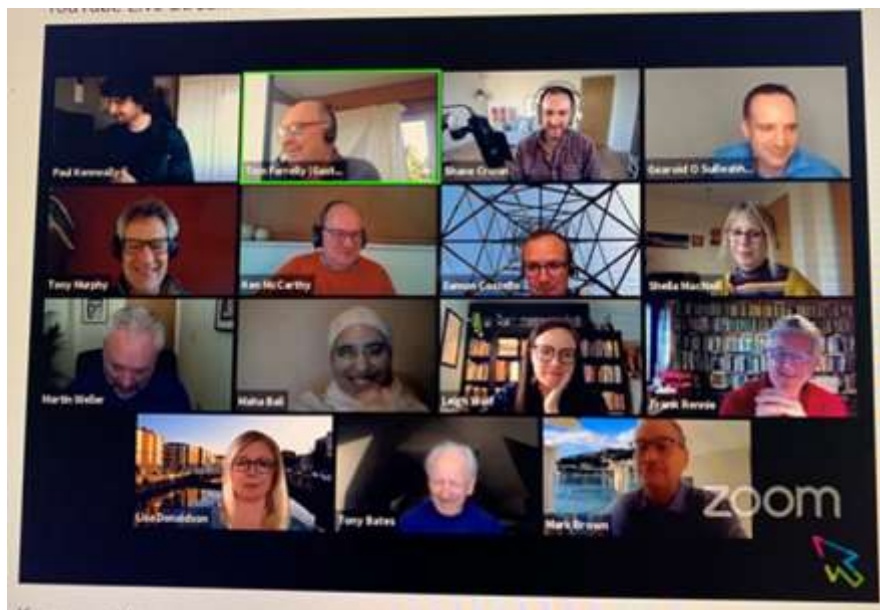

2.1. Response and Metrics.

Gasta Goes Global was effectively organised in less than four weeks. Promotion was largely done via Twitter which is the not only the leading platform for discussion among the EdTech community (Gertstein, 2011) but one which allowed the organisers to leverage the invited

speaker's own networks to promote the event across the world. The hashtag #GastaGoesGlobal was used extensively to promote the event and to date (8th June 2020) a total of 1,020 tweets were shared with that hashtag by a total of 212 Twitter users. On the night of the event #GastaGoesGlobal was trending #1 in Ireland for approximately three hours. Twitter provided an invaluable backchannel on the night of the event and a platform for attendees to have their views captured and shared. Analysis using Martin Hawksey's [TAGSExplorer](#) tool shows the extent of the network of engagement around the event.

WordPress analytics indicate there have been 3,284-page views generated by 1,259 visitors to the [gasta.me](#) website from 52 different countries at the time of writing (8th June 2020). Registration data from over 250 individuals who registered included attendees from almost all Irish HEIs as well as a number in the UK, USA and Canada. However, registration was optional, and the event could be viewed by any visitor to the website on the day of the event. Website traffic on the day indicated that 440 visitors viewed a total of 1,089 pages.

A total of 509 chat messages were posted on the YouTube livestream during the event and the recurring themes and observations were fed back to both the speakers and attendees at the conclusion of the event.   This feedback loop was a critical component of the audience interactivity and was very well received.

Figure 2: YouTube comments activity during the live event.
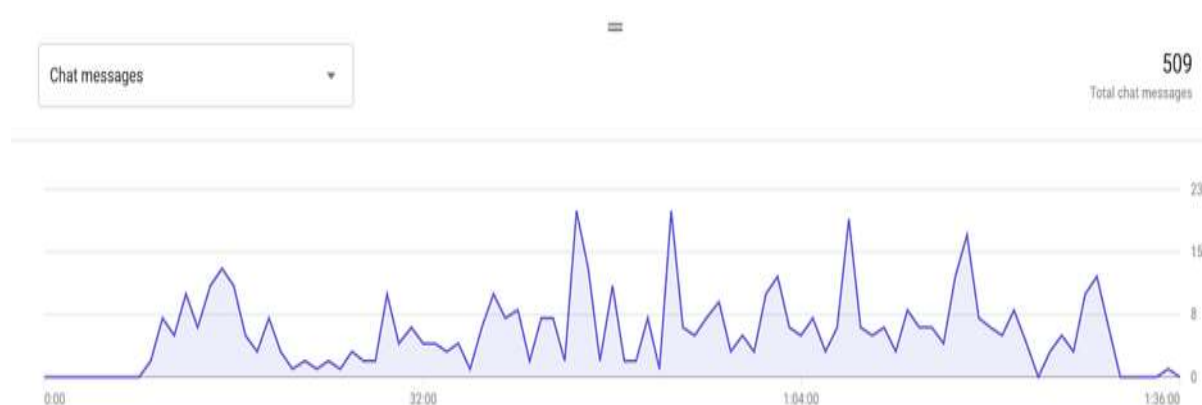
The full video of the event, which was trimmed and timestamped the following day, accumulated 1,194 views at the time of writing (8th June 2020). In the weeks following the event five of the presenters wrote about their participation in their own blogs or institutional website. Bozkurt et

al. (2020) highlighted 31 case studies from around the globe illustrating various educational responses to COVID-19: the Irish case study included the Gasta Goes Global as one the initiatives undertaken by the Irish higher education sector during the pandemic lockdown.

3. Discussion.

Interestingly, the seven speakers did not talk explicitly about technology. Rather, they highlighted the following aspects: caring for one another; trust; resilience; engagement and hope. These messages should resonate with anybody involved in education. Amidst all this talk of 'pivoting online' it is too easy to become enamoured with the latest technology and lose sight that online learning is not technology-led but rather but pedagogy-led and is not simply about what technologies we use, but how and why we use them. Given the obvious challenges of running a live online distributed event, reaching across multiple time zones, there were numerous potential points of failure. While Twitter and YouTube showed strong levels of engagement; Instagram and Mentimeter had lower levels of engagement suggesting perhaps that attendees were less familiar with or they were less valued platforms. Alternatively, they may have failed to gain traction because no individual within the organising community was given the role of moderating these platforms. Additionally, while Twitter was the key platform used to promote the event, there was a late surge in registrations that seemed to relate to the use of a more traditional communication tool: email. The day before the event, emails were sent to staff in the three higher education institutes in which the authors are based and the timing of the additional registrations and the associated email accounts strongly suggest that email acted as an effective promotional tool. With so many communication tools out there, it is easy to lose sight of just how effective email can still be (Taylor, 2019).

3.1. Conclusion.

By any measure, the event was a success and demonstrated what can be achieved by a small self-organising team in a short space of time. While the management of the event was not explicitly 'agile' in a formal sense, the approach adapted and described in the paper bear a number of the hallmarks of agile project management (Hoda, Noble & Marshall, 2013) in terms of: the project began with a relatively broad goal or vision and on the basis of ongoing reflection adjusting constantly in response to new challenges and discoveries. Without wishing to labour the point, we are moving into a new era where the certainties of the past have been dislodged

and we need to be open to implementing new ways of doing things. With respect to the world of academic conferences, Reshef et al. (2020, p. 253) argues that: "The format of scientific conferences has not meaningfully changed in centuries...Therefore, it is not surprising that many in the academic community are hesitant to deviate from this model, despite the emergence of many web-based alternatives". All too often online has been regarded as a poor second or necessary if unfortunate alternative to the 'real world' rather than having a value of itself. If the Gasta online event and the general 'pivot to online' has taught us anything it is that online conferences can be both meaningful and engaging. Indeed, online makes possible events that would be difficult, if not impossible to achieve in the face-to-face world. The 'long tail' of engagement through the creation of the open access resources hosted on the website demonstrates how online conferences can have a residual impact. Unlike watching the recording of a face-to- face conference, the digital outputs of an online conference are different, they are not a facsimile of the 'real' event - they are the real event; they were born in the digital world for the digital world. The experience of organising the Gasta event highlights the innovative ways that we can reach out and support each other as a rapid community response to COVID-19.

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