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Marianna Leikomaa, Senior Lecturer, Pedagogical Innovations, Tampere University of Applied Sciences

BEING BORING – ARE YOU AN ONLINE SNOOZEFEST?

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Online lectures, Zooms, Teams and so on are – for better or for worse – here to stay. Even before COVID-19 hit, there was continuous pressure and also enthusiasm to transfer education into online environments, and in 2020 there was no choice. For many teachers, this means creating online videos or lecturing using video in a live online situation – and for many students, this means naptime!

As all of us know, there are differences between classroom and online pedagogy and teaching, but there are also differences between live lecturing and lecturing through video. The article focuses on how to make yourself more interesting and thus more effective in an online video. It will not cover such practicalities as making and sharing videos, but instead focuses on presentation and easy participant activation during lectures.

Lecturing – or indeed giving any kind of presentation – is very different depending on the situation. Are you in a classroom or an auditorium? In a live online situation through, for example Zoom or Teams, or using a prerecorded video? Was the video recorded in front of an audience, or was it just one person talking to a camera? All these situations have wildly different atmospheres and opportunities for interaction, and both of those need to be considered when offering a lecture online.

In a classroom situation, the interaction between the lecturer and the listener is, at least in theory, simple. The lecturer may ask questions from the audience, and vice versa. The lecturer may offer the audience small or larger tasks to do, either alone or collaboratively, throughout the lecture. Of course, the same situation may apply in a larger auditorium, but with larger audiences, it is more difficult to allow everybody time to ask questions – some people may even be hesitant to ask questions in front of a large crowd.

In a live situation, the lecturer should be able to “read the room”: it is possible to gauge from the reactions of the audience whether they are listening or not. The lecturer can see the audience, hear their comments, hear if they are doing something else and even see if they are sleeping! Through interpreting this feedback, it is possible to change the lecture while giving it: including more questions to the audience or using other methods to activate the listeners.

In an online situation, even if giving a live (not prerecorded) lecture, this becomes much more difficult. Very often only the lecturer has their camera on, and even more often, the listeners have their mics muted – as they of course should have. This means there is often no feedback from the audience, and it can be difficult to tell if anybody is even listening. The computer provides ample opportunities to multitasking, which may in turn lead to the audience not focusing on the lecture and poorer learning.

What could be done? This article will first focus on what needs to be considered when presenting through a video in general, either live or using a prerecorded video, and then cover some aspects which may help interaction in a live video situation.

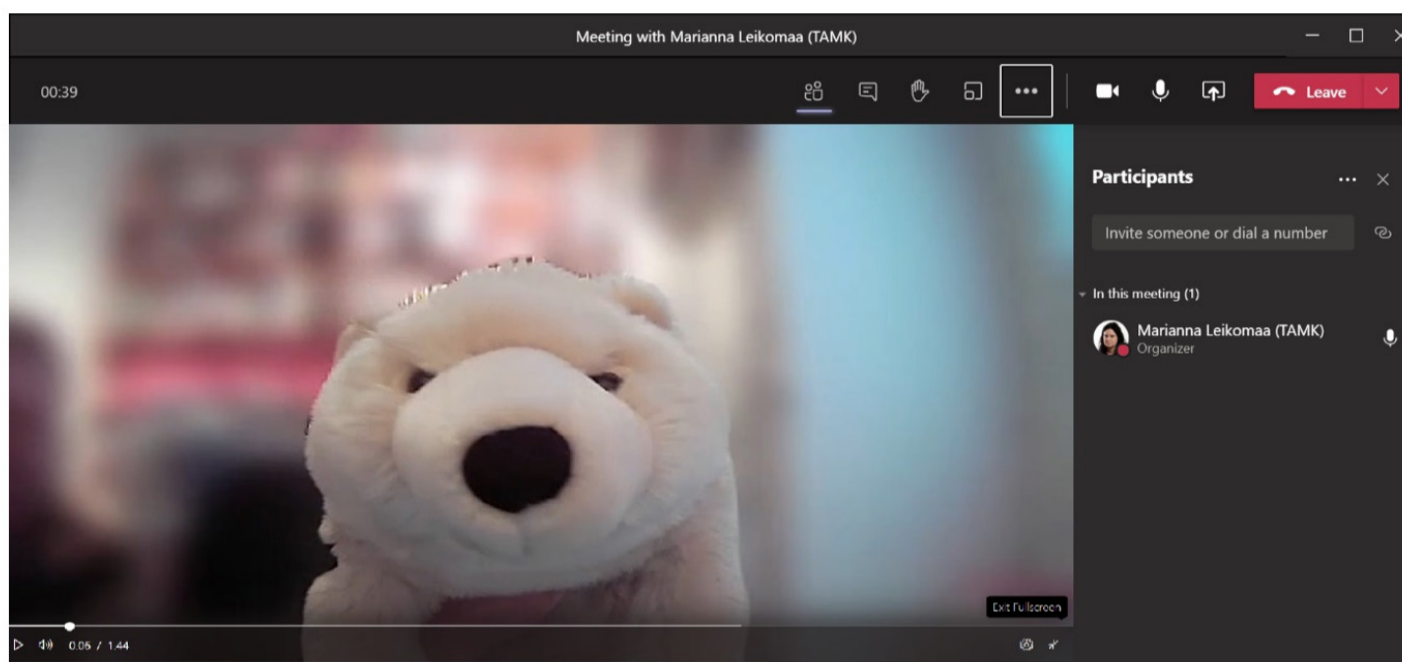
Creating the video

The first important thing to consider when creating a video of any kind is to have the right technology. While a webcam and a basic headset are sufficient for many situations, if creating several videos, it might be worth investing on a slightly better quality setup. While the cameras of many laptops are not that great, having good and clear audio is far more important in online videos (see e.g. VTREP). If using, for example, Zoom to record, it emphasizes the quality of the audio over video, especially if the connection is bad.

It may be worth investing on a good headset, or even a good external microphone. Using the built-in microphone of a webcam cannot really be recommended, as the sound quality is usually quite poor, and it picks up all the interference from outside sound sources. In general, having the microphone as close to one's mouth as possible is advised. If the lecturer wishes to use a full-body image of themselves on the video, having a wireless microphone, which picks up just their speech, is crucial. All microphones should be tested before any recording – is the quality of the sound clear? A good way of testing the microphone is to practice the lecture while recording: a simple “check 1–2” does not cover the nuances of speech very well, and the tone and volume of the presenter may change greatly throughout the presentation, so testing a slightly longer part of the lecture may be worthwhile.

Although the video is not quite as important as the audio, it is worth considering. Is it a “talking head”, or is the video used for demonstrating something? Even in a case of just having the lecturer's face on the camera, it is worth thinking about how the image looks. While having a professional attire and appearance are a given, video may not reproduce them well if the lighting

is bad. Having a good light goes a long way with improving the image quality. Also, the camera should be slightly above the speaker's eye-level. Many laptops have their cameras in slightly weird angles regarding the user, so investing on an individual USB webcam may be worthwhile – the camera can then be propped into an angle which makes the presenter look as good as possible. It is also easier to include proper lighting with an external camera.



Picture 1. Major Ursa creating an online presentation without realizing her ears are out of focus

All the classroom lecturing good practices should, of course, still be maintained: a good structure for the presentation, making it clear when a topic changes, summarizing at the end and repeating of information as needed. One of the quickest ways to kill all the interest in anything the lecturer has to say is to read directly from the slides.

Slides, whether PowerPoint or something else, work well in a video context, but some things need to be considered here as well. Many lecturers create their slides to be used on a large screen in a large room, but many students watch their videos on small screens – or even smaller, smart phone screens. Having slides full

of text, graphs and numbers may not convey the information quite the way the lecturer intended. Instead, the slides should include large images, clear graphs and not necessarily that much text. The slides should – as always – support the presentation the best way possible. Very often, it is worth it having separate slides for the lecture and different files as learning material for the students – the slides do not have to work as the handout! Even when giving the slides to the students, consider including the bulk of the text into the presenter notes instead of the slides to be presented.

Finally, the length of the video. While having a 60–90-minute class is common, watching and listening to a 60–90-minute video can be very draining, especially if there is no interaction. Video-lectures, whether live or prerecorded, should be quite a bit shorter: anything over 35 minutes is often considered quite long already and while “today’s students” are used to watching online videos, the videos they watch tend to be 5–15 minutes long. Consider dividing the lectures into shorter sections with – depending on the situation – either tasks and breaks between them, or just offering them as individual, shorter videos in a learning management system. Moodle also offers tools for creating tasks within videos: the H5P-tool Interactive Video allows for quite easy insertion of multiple-choice questions etc. inside existing videos. These can be used to activate students and to ensure they feel they have learned.

Presenting live through video

One of the most difficult things to do in a live video lecture is to keep the audience engaged. Luckily, there are many fairly simple tools to improve the interaction, at least somewhat. It will never be quite the same as in a classroom, though.

Naturally, the lecturer should have their camera open. The students may not be quite as eager to have theirs open, but they

should be actively and often encouraged to at least ask questions, either through voice communication or through chat. A common problem with many lecturers is not knowing their presentation software very well: in all common video conferencing software, it is possible to have the chat in a pop-up window and to be able to follow it for possible questions while presenting. Of course, it is also possible to have an assistant to monitor the chat for questions, but for situations where the lecturer is presenting alone, knowing how to access the chat all the time is useful.

When giving the presentation, it is important to look directly at the camera. It is tempting to look at either the notes or the slides but in order to truly speak to the audience, it is important to look at them directly. This is a common problem with many presenters, especially if they are using several computers at the same time, but the situation is actually quite the same as in a classroom situation: the lecturer should not just sit behind their computer or lecture to the whiteboard there, either, but instead keep their eyes on the audience.

Speak clearly and with enthusiasm, intonation and emphasis. Video saps away enthusiasm from speech more than one would think, and that in turn results to very sleep-inducing performances. When recording, or when giving an online lecture, having a bit of extra enthusiasm may seem fake to the lecturer, but it transmits to the audience – the same is true in a classroom situation, where the students often give feedback how they liked the teacher being enthusiastic about their topic. While it is not necessary to go overboard with the energy and enthusiasm, it is worth noticing: consider recording a bit of a lecture and watching the video to see if there is a difference between how it felt and what the video plays back. In a classroom situation, enthusiasm is also generated by the audience, but in a video-situation, it all comes from the lecturer.

The lecturer can and should engage the audience through, for example, questions. Not all questions need to be answered – even rhetorical questions make the audience more interested – but if asking non-rhetorical questions, it is important to allow enough time for answering. A few seconds is not enough. This will lead to silent moments, but as students seem to be even more reluctant to answer in an online lecture than in classroom, it is worth the wait. Again, mentioning that the replies may be given through either voice or chat, lowers the barrier for replies. If students reply through chat, it is important to perhaps read the replies out loud or at least clearly comment on them – if it seems the lecturer is not interested in the chat comments, they will stop coming. Another easy way to get the students to react is to occasionally ask them to use the reaction buttons available in most video conferencing software. “Thumbs up if you’ve ever encountered this!” It may not seem like much, but it does involve the listeners and it gives the lecturer some insight into who is still awake.

Other good ways of engaging the audience are the use of polls and other, possibly 3rd party, software. The polls do not have to be difficult or complex, a simple “Have you already eaten breakfast?” poll before a class starts properly is a good way to break the ice and get the students activated. Polls and such can, of course, also be used to measure learning by asking questions from the content of the lecture. Students can be also be asked to write the most important/ difficult topics to Flinga or a padlet and then use their “like” functions to vote on the things that need to be covered in more detail. Kahoot works well in online situations, as does Quizlet Live. Overusing these can be a problem, but when used sparingly, they do liven up lectures.

Breakout rooms can also be used in longer classes – students may work on a task together and then present their findings. Perhaps

they can create a slide set to be shared with others. Experience has shown this to have problems, though, as some students simply disappear the moment the lecturer is not “watching” them, leaving the other students in a breakout room at a disadvantage. But depending on the group, this may work well, and it definitely can activate the students. It is also worth considering whether the students could create learning materials, such as videos, themselves as well: of course this is not suitable for all topics, but there are groups where the students’ expertise could also be utilized, for example when it comes to adult learners with plenty of experience in their field.

The final consideration is the most difficult one: should everything be done through lectures? Lectures are the de facto mode of higher education, but is always the best one? Might students be sometimes given tasks to do on their own, perhaps watching non-lecture videos and demonstrations, interviewing experts, working together on collaborative knowledge construction, sharing their own expertise, or even reading? Not all the time, lectures still have their time and place, but it is worth considering whether 300 minutes of online video lectures each week is really the best pedagogical approach. No matter how good a presenter you are.

Conclusion

Videos are a great addition to online learning, enabling content delivery in multiple ways. However, when creating videos, the difference between a live classroom situation, a live video lecture, and a prerecorded lecture must be considered in order to ensure the students’ engagement and learning.

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