ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH VIDEO CONFERENCING

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PROFILE

Silke Reeploeg is a tutor in history and literature and teaches on both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. She has been nominated several times for the student-led teaching awards, and won Most Engaging Videoconference Tutor in 2015.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT TEACHING BY VIDEOCONFERENCE (VC)?

VC is an artificial form of communication, and you have to work to get over this. I have just developed a few ways to keep things flowing as naturally as possible. It is essential to be able the see all of the participants, and be aware of their body language: you can tell those who are perhaps not so keen on speaking up from their stance or facial expression. I like to bring in those quieter students as early as I can; if you don't speak during the first 5-10 minutes of a class you are unlikely to contribute at all. I also make a point of not putting students on the spot by asking direct question about that week's reading. This feels like 'checking up on them' and can break down the trust that is vital to a good student-tutor relationship, particularly when one does not meet the students face to face.

DESCRIBE A TYPICAL LESSON

Most of my VC sessions are 2 hours long, and I expect to spend the first 15 minutes sorting out technical issues. I just accept this as part of my class time and 'absorb' it into the lesson plan. I then like to start each class with conversation to get students talking. Groups are quite small, and I run them like a seminar, and like to use a more 'conversational style' than a formal one. In my view, learning is a conversation between tutor and student and the more conversation that happens in the classroom, the better. However, a 2 hour lesson can be exhausting for students so I intersperse the questions and discussion with some 'mini lectures' that I have prepared before the class. These also help those students who have not done the reading for the class that week: after a mini lecture everyone on the class is on the same level, and all should feel equipped to contribute.

USING THE CONTACT TIME WISELY

We only have a couple of hours face to face every week and I don't want this cluttered up with administrative questions. I make sure that the Blackboard VLE space is very structured and organised, and contains all the info that the students might need to access. Particularly important is a detailed timetable listing each week's topics, and reading. I also upload the notes from each 'mini lecture' after the class. If the VC discussion gets bogged down in a particular issue I will move things on, and get people to post up questions on the discussion board that the class can look at afterwards. Often, people go straight to the discussion board after the lesson to brainstorm. I like to start the next session by recapping the discussion from the previous week, including what has popped up on the online discussion board.

I do spend some time in the VC sessions talking about the assessments as this is the aspect of the course that causes the students the most anxiety. I talk about what's expected just so there is complete transparency about the assessment arrangements. All VC sessions are also recorded for students to recap things, or for absent students to catch up.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Leave the room early at the end of some sessions and let the students chat for 10 or so minutes; this works well to gel the group, especially in the first couple of weeks.
- Test out your VC with a colleague: settings, camera switching from your face and then to the whole room. Learn how to scroll through the participants so your students don't just become disembodied voices.
- Have some rules and regulations (no crisps or slurping of tea!)
- Give a small lesson on 'how to use VC' in the first session covering basics like muting microphones when not speaking, what to do if interrupted, letting students practice with the equipment.
- Jabber users are a whole other thing: test this out before the first lecture if you can, including using Jabber yourself (you never know when you might need it- room bookings may be messed up or doors locked at some point in the semester)
- Encourage humour
- Realise that there's a limit to what you can do as a tutor: highlight to students the VC help that is available (https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/lis/vc)
- Watch other colleagues delivering by VC to pick up some tips. It may be possible to view recordings.
- Watch some of your own sessions back and reflect on how it went and how you came across
- Don't wear tartan! Or any other patterns as these do not show well on the VC

If you wish to submit your own case study, or have any questions about this resource please contact:
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