**Ten Top Tips for Effective Videoconferencing**

So, you want to have a great video conference with students in your course and students in another location. Here are ten tips to ensure it goes really well.

**10. Pre-test the technology**

Make sure you test the tech. Try a mock broadcast a few days before the actual day, using the exact tech tools and room you will use when you will do it for real. Even the same time of day, if you can, to test the likely amount of traffic that will be on-line when you are. Then on the day of the Skype call, (I prefer Skype, but Google Hangout can work well too) test it again 30 min before you are ready to begin, to make double sure you are ready.

**9. Build in back-up systems for when things go wrong.**

Have a plan to go to just audio if you need to, by turning off the video camera if the connection starts breaking up. My courses often have a closed Facebook page, so if it completely fails, have students go to the Facebook page and do instant text messaging.

And have a backchannel set up, where you have a designated person (or instructor) in each location who is sending text messages back and forth (We often use WeChat, a free app) while the video conferencing is going on, so you can let each other know if something needs adjusting: better lighting, or needing to move on to another agenda item, for example.

**8. Set up for good image quality**

This is a top feature of video; that you can actually see others and their surroundings. We use a simple laptop and attach it to a projector with an attached speaker (Don’t just use the laptop speaker for anything larger than 3 people on a side). Make sure the lighting is good, and distraction free. Use natural light when you can, or interior lights, ideally from three sources, but don’t mix the two. And Pay attention to the background. No clutter, but do give context whenever possible. (Logo of school, blank attractive color backdrop, etc.)

**7. Personalize and equalize the video imagery**

You want to feel you are on the same level with one another, so set up the camera so students are looking directly into the camera at their eye level (as they look toward their international partners on the screen). No one wants to be looked down upon, or conversely, be looking up or to the side. You want it to feel like it would if you were in the same room, looking at each other.

Full classroom shots are fine for an opening, but when students are ready to begin talking, have them close to the camera so they fill the screen with their head and top part of body. And have no more than 3 people immediately in front of the camera when they are talking, otherwise it feels too impersonal.

**6. After ensuring you have great visuals, the next most important quality is sound.**

You need great sound. Attach good quality portable speakers to the computer you are using, or use the sound system in your classroom if it is well-designed, and stage the conference in a room with a carpet and good acoustics. A bad room with echoing or outside sounds because of open windows is very distracting. It can be also helpful to also use a simple wireless mike (or one with a long cord) so you can give to the speaker to improve the sound quality if the room is lousy. And have them practice before hand so the students get used to how far away the mike should be from their mouth.

And, even if you get good sound, have someone be the ChatBox Champion. This especially helps overcome both poor sound and also helps when people are speaking in a non-native language, which is often the case for one of the countries. We usually ask who in the class has strength with hearing English spoken by non-natives, and we ask who is a fast typist. Then we have those two people sit up at the computer and one person types while the other person listens and offers suggestions if the typist is incorrectly hearing something said. In this way, students can look at the projected screen image and not only hear the speakers, but read a summary of what is being said in the text box below the image. Ideally we have a team on both sides doing this and only typing when students in their own class are talking. This seems to increase accuracy all around.

**5. Have students practice talking ahead of time**

Because one partner (usually the non-American one) is often using a second or third language (to make it work for the more mono-lingual Americans), catching all the words can be a challenge. So in addition to making sure the volume is high enough, and the clarity is good, you want to have students practice speaking more slowly than usual, with good pronunciations, and to avoid slang. Again, some practicing on this before-hand can really help!

In a video conference, It really helps to talk in shorter phrases too, and talk slower than usual than what you would ordinarily do in a face to face conversation. It especially helps to do this with this medium but also because you are talking across cultures, so it takes more time to process stuff.

**4. Plan it, don’t wing it.**

Figure out ahead of time what the agenda will be, and assign coordinators from both countries to work this out. Like any meeting, but especially here, it’s important to build in at the beginning a bit of informal chit chat, warm up talk to get folks comfortable. We do this unconsciously when we meet face to face, and it’s really important to do it in a video meeting, because the tech creates more distance and you need to work at it to narrow that emotional distance.

It can help to use good visuals too, in a meeting and pay attention to the group process. Who is talking who seems to be left out, and signal when you are ready to move to the next agenda item.

**3. Be nice.**

Rudeness is amplified on video and it’s easy to not even notice it when you are doing it. Students who are not talking, but are seen in the background who are looking at their computer, or whispering, or texting, or yawning can appear very rude to the other side. Alert students to this ahead of time, and I often watch the students carefully at first and get the student to stop that behavior quickly if it happens, with a silent message of some type.

**2. Actively respond regularly during the videoconference, and you create a relationship. Silence creates distance on video.**

Again, little things make a big difference. After a student or student group makes a presentation, be sure to clap as a group in reply. Or a student may say, “hi, my name is Omar”, and your class can respond in unison, with “hi Omar!” When someone poses a question to the other partner classroom, it’s good to have someone thank them for the question, maybe repeat it so everyone hears it correctly, then help to facilitate someone responding to the question.

And at the end of the video conference, have someone prepared for a closing. The person can summarize what happened, thank the other partner classroom for one or two things in particularly they liked about how the conference went or what the other partner contributed, and suggest a next step, if appropriate. At the end of the course, figuring out ahead of time how to say “goodbyes’ is very important. Students will sometimes think of something they want to offer, by way of thanks, like performing a song together that has meaning, or is a tribute to what the partnership has meant to them, or a fun salute to the times they have had together with a dance, or words in the native tongue of the partner.

**1. Follow up**

It’s really helpful to follow up immediately with reactions from a video conference...that can be a short thank you recorded video of 30 seconds of thanks (it was great to meet you), or facebook notes, and the coordinators might even do a quick debrief to check out perceptions of what happened and follow up steps.

If you do these things, it will dramatically improve your video conference experience, and everyone will want to come back for more. Pretty soon, you will start to feel like you are in the same room together!