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How to? Teaching via Videoconferencing [HPEC FastFacts]

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CITATION

Moffett, Jenny (2020): How to? Teaching via Videoconferencing [HPEC FastFacts]. Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Journal contribution. https://hdl.handle.net/10779/rcsi.12563132.v1

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HPEC Fast Facts

How to: Teaching via video-conferencing

Fast Facts: Teaching via video-conferencing

We've witnessed an unprecedented switch to online teaching and learning at RCSI, and many of us are getting to grips with new tools, technologies and teaching styles.

In this month's Fast Facts we explore online teaching, specifically teaching through video-conferencing. We will walk through setting up and running a session on Blackboard Collaborate, RCSI's chosen video-conferencing software.

When teacher and students are online in the same space at the same time, this is known as "synchronous" online learning. Video-conferencing software is one version of this, allowing teachers to connect with their learners despite geographical barriers.

The literature around video-conferencing suggests that learners feel positive about this format, and that it can be used to promote effective, collaborative learning (Al-Samarraie, 2019). However, it is also

recognised that technical difficulties sometimes occur (McBrien et al., 2009) and, overall, the process can feel daunting for those who are new to the format or to a specific software.

Luckily, at RCSI there are a range of supports in place for educators. These are discussed below alongside a step-by-step guide for running a video-conference session with Blackboard Collaborate.

Before class

- Build your technology know-how up by watching one of the multiple guides provided by RCSI IT.
- Try the software out in a safe environment. IT has also created a Blackboard Collaborate drop-in session where you can "test drive" the dashboard.
- In the Blackboard Collaborate dashboard, check your audio by tapping on the microphone icon to unmute, and then saying something (the microphone should fill with white if it picks up your voice). Note that a headset (incorporating headphones and a built-in microphone) normally produces better sound quality – a teenager in the house can often help you source this!
- Check video by clicking on the camera icon. Picture quality is less important, but video does help to support your social presence with the students. If video is patchy then your internet connectivity might be poor. If possible, move to an area with better reception. When using video, it's also worth spending a few moments getting your position right so that you are clearly lit and centred in the frame. Don't forget to check what's in the background!
- Plan your sessions. The technology is important, but so is the pedagogy. Ask yourself "What are the learning outcomes I need to help the students to achieve in this session?" Online, less is more, so try to keep content succinct.
- Consider when and how you want your learners to interact with you. Rather than one long session with room for questions at the end, "chunk" your material into 10-15 minute segments with short breaks. In these breaks, students can be encouraged to carry out a reflective exercise, engage in a discussion or ask questions of you.
- When you are ready to host your first session, know that you can have an IT/education team member present to help ensure that things run smoothly, and troubleshoot any technical issues you or the students may have. To avail of this option, book in here.
- Immediately prior to your session: recheck your microphone, video and internet connectivity.
- Pre-load your session with the material you want to use. BlackBoard Collaborate accepts PowerPoint slides, PDFs and image files, but not Word documents. To load your content, you will first need to open the Collaborate panel, by clicking the two arrows icon in the lower right quadrant of the screen. Then click S*hare content* (icon with arrow to the right) > *Share files* > *Add files*. Once your content has uploaded, click it to highlight it, click *Share now* and click the first slide to display it to your students.

- Finally, have a plan B. If the worst comes to the worst (usually poor internet connectivity), have an idea how you might support learning differently, e.g. narrated PowerPoint slides supported by a discussion forum, and communicate this to the students via Moodle.

During class

- Your Blackboard Collaborate session will become accessible 15 minutes before the official start time and you should use this time to carry out final audio and video checks, load your content, and settle any nerves.
- Greet your students, invite them to say "hi" in the chat room. Have your video on so that they can see you.
- Start your session by addressing any tech issues. Ask your students if they can hear you – in large groups, it's normally best to direct them to the chat box. Double check that your students are using Chrome as a browser as this will remedy many audio problems.
- If you are experiencing audio feedback, it may be that some of the students have hit their microphone by accident. The "mute all" button will solve this; this is available in the panel to your right. Hit the people icon on the bottom > *More options* (three dots, top right of screen) > *Mute all*. It is good practice to ask everybody to mute their microphones any time they are not speaking.
- Select *Share content* and your pre-loaded slides should now be available.
- Begin recording. This button is available by hitting the *Open session menu* (three lines) on the top left of your screen. This is the step that is easy to forget, so add a reminder in your slides, or ask a colleague who is present to spot you on this! It is good practice to let students know that you are recording the session.
- Opening communication is really important. Orient your students on what the session will look like. For example, you might signpost with: "OK, so we have a 50-minute session today. Here are the three main areas I'm going to cover, and there will be 2-3 places for you to ask questions as we go, so just hold off until then. I'll direct you to the chat box when we are ready…"
- Use your naturally awesome teaching skills to be "present" with your students. A quick ice-breaker or "hook" with a photo, story or challenging question can help engage the audience.
- In the session, focus on the learning outcomes. Emphasise these with key slides and verbal sign-posting ("This really is a key point and one I want you take home from this session.").
- With large groups of students it can be really helpful to have another member of your teaching team partner up with you. In this way they can manage a "back channel" of questions from the audience, which frees you up to concentrate on the lecture delivery.

After class

- Take a deep breath, give yourself a pat on the back. Online teaching is an exhilarating experience!

- If you recorded your session, it will become automatically available in Moodle within an hour or so.
- Don't worry if it didn't go exactly to plan. Technology problems can and will happen, and – as we know right now – there are often factors outside of our control. Remember, "perfect is the enemy of perfectly fine."
- Once you feel your confidence build, try more features, e.g. Blackboard Collaborate's polling system, or get creative, with online office hours and journal clubs – see our links below for more guidance on this.
- Reach out to others on your team who might appreciate a wing-man or wing-woman on their own video-conferencing sessions.

Learn more

Further ideas and inspiration for using video-conferencing in teaching:

- Krutka, D. G., Carano, K. T., Cassell, L., Lavoie, M., & Davidson-Taylor, K. (2019). Wise Practices and Intercultural Understandings: A Framework for Educator Videoconferencing. Journal of Research on Technology in Education, 51(4), 356-376.
- Lowenthal, P., Dunlap, J., & Snelson, C. (2017). Live synchronous web meetings in asynchronous online courses: Reconceptualizing virtual office hours. *Online Learning Journal*, *21*(4).
- Martin, F., Ahlgrim-Delzell, L., & Budhrani, K. (2017). Systematic review of two decades (1995 to 2014) of research on synchronous online learning. American Journal of Distance Education, 31(1), 3-19.
- Musits, A. N., & Mannix, A. L. (2020). Synchronous Online Journal Club to Connect Subspecialty Trainees across Geographic Barriers. *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine*, *21*(1), 33.

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