

Using videoconferencing for research seminar presentations

Dawn Lamond

Teaching context	
Subject area	Health care.
Course level	Mixed (see below).
Participants	<p>Staff Several organisers. One invited speaker for each seminar.</p> <p>Students Between 3 and 30 at each site.</p> <p>Participants are a mixture of members of staff from within the Department, from other departments across the University, students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and staff from clinical areas (hospitals and community health care). Participants often know each other, with members of staff from within the department across the three campus sites.</p>
Type of use	Research seminars, lasting 1 hour.
Teaching methods	Speakers present a research seminar paper. The audience then has an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the presentation.
Length of use	Series of seminars over 2 years.
Project background	No special funding.
Sites	Stirling, Inverness, and Stornoway Campus sites of Department of Nursing and Midwifery, Stirling University.
Prior experience	Most speakers have no prior experience. Author fairly confident about using the technology.
Technical context	
Conference type	Multi-point 3 sites.
Technology used	ISDN 2.
Additional equipment	Visualiser, video player.
Software	Shared software applications.
Contact	
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Background

The Department of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Stirling has three campus sites, one in Stirling itself, one in Inverness and one in Stornoway. The Department views research activity as an integral part of its work across all three campus sites.

Why videoconferencing was chosen

It was felt that using videoconferencing was the obvious way to facilitate research activity and ensure that all campus sites could participate.

The Execution

The seminars occur in one of two different types of location within the main University site. One location is a traditional lecture theatre which has an ISDN socket. This means that the seating is fairly “traditional” in that the audience sits in rows, with the speaker at the front of the lecture theatre. The videoconference equipment is organised so that the distant sites can see the speaker, but not the audience. The set up in the distant sites is such that the speaker can see the audience.

The second location at the main University site is a classroom which has an ISDN socket. This allows for more flexibility in the set up of the seminar, with the audience in rows and the speaker at the front of the room. The videoconference equipment can be organised so that the distant sites can see the speaker and part of the audience. The speaker can see the audience at the distant sites.

When speakers have presented from one of the distant sites to the main University campus, the organisation is similar. In this instance, the videoconference equipment is organised so that the speaker can be seen by the distant audience, and the audience can be seen by the speaker.

The seminars normally consist of a 40-45 minute presentation by an invited speaker. The equipment used varies depending on the speaker, but has included overheads and slides (projected with the aid of a visualiser), PowerPoint presentations and the use of video clips. After the presentation the audience has the opportunity to ask questions of the speaker, and often a lively discussion ensues, across the campus sites.

What support was needed

As the organiser of the seminars, some training on how to use the equipment was provided by the Media and AV Services Department at the University. They offered full technical support for the seminar presentations, including setting up the equipment and testing it before the seminar commences. This has been crucial, as the variability in the types of presentations given by invited speakers has often necessitated quite complicated technical back up.

Evaluation comments

On the whole the seminars have been evaluated positively by participants across the department. Often evaluations depend on the nature of the speaker, rather than the logistics of the videoconference itself.

The Barriers

Several factors have been identified over the 2 years which seem to inhibit good videoconferencing at the seminars. Firstly, the speakers need to ensure that the materials they use can be seen by audiences at the other end of the videoconference equipment (especially for overheads and PowerPoint presentations). Also, many of the invited speakers have not encountered videoconference equipment before, and find the set up quite daunting. In order to try and overcome this a leaflet has been developed (entitled "Guidelines for seminar speakers") which is sent to each invited speaker. This has appeared to aid them in their preparation for talking at the seminars.

Another barrier identified in the early stages of the seminar programme occurs during the question phase. If there is a large audience at one site, and someone asks a question from the back of the room, it is often difficult for the distant sites to hear the question, and they therefore cannot gain full benefit from the ensuing discussion. This has been rectified by the Chair of each session repeating the question clearly into the microphone, for the benefit of all audiences.

A final barrier is concerned with feedback (in terms of audience noise or sound echoing) which may occur from the distant sites when the seminar is in progress. This has been easily solved by the distant sites turning off their microphones whilst the speaker is talking, unless they wish to ask a question.

The Enablers

Organising the seminars so that the distant audiences can see the speaker, and ask questions, appears to facilitate good discussion across the sites. If the speakers have clear materials (whether they are overheads / slides or a PowerPoint presentation) the seminars seem to be more successful. If possible, copies of speaker's materials (overheads / notes) are sent to the distant sites in advance (by fax). This also appeared to aid the presentation of the seminars. Speakers who are clearly spoken are also received more favourably. When the questions asked are clearly presented, whether by the questioner or when repeated by the Chair, this also seems to facilitate a good seminar session.

Advice for new users

The department seminars continue to be videoconferenced. Any advice to be given has been covered in the previous sections, however in summary:

1. Make sure you have good technical support and the ability to use a variety of different methods of information presentation.
2. Speakers should be given some information beforehand regarding the nature of videoconferencing and what to expect.
3. Information presented should be clear, and if possible check that it can be seen on the distant sites.
4. Make sure that any discussion can be clearly heard by participants on all sites.