

A Doctoral viva by videoconference⁴

Michael Pitt

Teaching context	
Subject area	Building Engineering.
Participants	Staff One internal and one external examiner on site, one external examiner at remote site. Students PhD candidate on site. I had met the remote external examiner once, and knew the internal examiner well, but had not previously met the second (on-site) external examiner.
Type of use	Doctoral Viva examination.
Length of use	Single occasion.
Project background	One-off use, paid for from Departmental funds.
Sites	Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, and Emory University, Atlanta, USA.
Prior experience	None, but confident with technology.
Technical context	
Conference type	Point to point.
Technology used	Studio based ISDN6 conference.
Additional equipment	Visualiser.
Contact	
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Background

The Viva is the culmination of at least three years' work on a highly specialised topic, and necessarily involves bringing together the candidate with an internal subject specialist and at least one external expert in the field. The candidate discusses and defends the thesis through about two hours of detailed questioning.

Why videoconferencing was chosen

Two external specialists had agreed to take this Viva, Professor Parrish from Cambridge and Professor Fox-Genovese from Atlanta, USA. For health reasons Professor Fox-Genovese was unable to travel, and the Viva had to be cancelled at very short notice. While I had a (rather dismal) holiday and contemplated a lengthy delay, Professor Banfill at Heriot-Watt suggested a videoconference with Professor Fox-Genovese, (in spite of his having no prior experience), and this was arranged. The alternative would have been a search for another suitable external subject specialist willing to take on the commitment to reading through the thesis and participating in a Viva, entailing a delay of at least six months. Furthermore, the thesis topic was closely related to the specialist work of Professor Fox-Genovese, making her the most appropriate examiner.

The Execution

Professor Parrish travelled from Cambridge to Edinburgh, and all the examiners had a brief discussion via the videoconference link before I was asked to join them in the room. After some initial strangeness, communication felt quite natural and we were able to discuss the thesis very freely. I don't feel that the "tele-presence" of one member of the panel in any way detracted from the quality of the discussion or distracted my attention from the subject. While one is naturally a little apprehensive about such a major examination, I don't feel the videoconference element affected this. Indeed it became quite an enjoyable experience and the time passed extremely quickly.

I gather the conference call cost several hundred pounds, which probably compares quite favourably with the cost of travel from the USA.

⁴ See Appendix C for a copy of the guidelines for examination by video link drawn up by the University of Edinburgh.

What support was needed

A week before the Viva I visited the studio on campus with Professor Banfill. The technicians provided a very helpful briefing on what to expect, warning me about the possible blurring of the picture if the person at the other end moved too quickly, and also that there would be a slight time-lag in both audio and video, putting the image out of synch with the sound. We were also able to discuss with the technician what seating arrangement would work best. The studio is a fairly small space, but the table and chairs are movable and we were easily able to arrange to sit around the end of the table so that everyone could see and hear everyone else. While the pre-conference visit did help to some extent, I had no experience of a real videoconference beforehand and so was not sure exactly what to expect.

Evaluation comments

As indicated above, the whole experience was quite enjoyable, and I was able to engage in a lively and detailed discussion with Professor Fox-Genovese quite easily. Professor Parrish commented at the end that he had found this discussion stimulating, suggesting that he too had not found the technology obtrusive. Being able to use the visualiser to sketch some diagrams to illustrate points also helped make the meeting more “natural”.

So far I have had no need to make further use of videoconferencing, but would certainly use it for one-to-one or small group meetings and tutorials if the need arose. I am wary of computers replacing traditional paper-based materials, but found this set-up very straightforward. Videoconferencing does impose a rather formal feeling, and I would be hesitant about using it where a greater degree of informality would be helpful. However it offers many advantages over a phone call, for example.

The Barriers

Because this was a “first” for the University, we had to seek special permission to validate a Viva conducted through this medium.

My initial reaction when walking into the room was that it was oddly like a “Monty Python” sketch, three people and a TV set sitting in a room - and indeed I commented on this. However I very soon forgot about the technology. It became a minor difficulty while we focused on the subject matter.

The time delay caused by the ISDN link across the Atlantic was slightly disconcerting at first, and occasionally caused minor problems of people talking across each other, but this was easily overcome. We experimented with the “zoom” facility on the camera but the normal setting allowed us to see each other clearly enough to allow natural communication. I had to ask Professor Fox-Genovese to repeat herself a few times when the sound was not too clear.

The Enablers

The technical support staff did all the work of setting things up and indeed I still don’t know much about the technical side.

Professor Fox-Genovese was either experienced in such videoconferencing or well briefed, as she made no sudden sharp movements or big gestures. The set-up at her end was such that she appeared to be looking directly at me, which was certainly helpful. At this end we had a single mike on the table, which presented no problems. I did not have to move towards it or raise my voice, nor did the others.

Advice for new users

If circumstances prevent a face-to-face meeting, videoconferencing is an obvious and very good alternative. Within Scottish HEIs it is especially easy because the rooms and technical staff are all there for you.