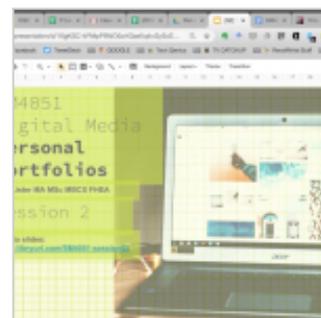


Teaching online from home



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This post is about some of the issues you might encounter when teaching online from home, especially without much time to prepare for this transition.

We are in unprecedented times, and us who teach (school, informal, non formal, tertiary) have had to move our practice online at very short notice. Many of us are inexperienced at doing any distance learning, unaware of issues we might encounter, and the unpredictable nature of teaching online. I'm going to run through a few problems you might meet (both learner and technical issues), and some solutions to those problems that you might try, or at least be aware of as possible options.

Video lecturing

Live sessions versus video lectures are a huge topic of conversation at the moment, in relevant social media as well as in my own network of colleagues and friends. Live sessions are great, essential if at all possible, as they support learner engagement and the social presence of learning and teaching (L&T), but sometimes a tutor cannot offer the whole package of synchronous sessions, for various reasons. Confidence in front of video: being comfortable hearing your own voice, being self conscious about your appearance on camera, 'knowing what to say' (being struck dumb when the red light goes on) can affect any of us, and I'll cover a little below. Plus, the big technical issue of sharing video screens that eats into WiFi bandwidth for you as well as your learner's broadband connection.

So, if you find yourself having to make some video lectures to then upload to your VLE for your students to watch later, here are a few technical things you might want to consider to make life easier for you, and for your learners.

Try not to think of a video lecture in quite the same way as a lecture you would do in class. You are talking to one person, not 20. You are chatting and engaging in a personal and engaged way, not speaking from a podium. Your face and facial expressions are much more significant, and being relaxed and friendly in your body language is important. But, don't force it, let it come naturally.

Length of Video Lectures

Keep video lectures under 40 minutes if at all possible. This means the learner is less daunted, the video will stream more easily, and the file is smaller, even in its 'raw' state. If necessary, break up your lecture into a few sections - bite-size videos of ten or fifteen minutes are much better for learners.

Screen capture

Use a good screen capture software - you have a few options:

- QuickTime, great for screen capture but no picture of you talking
- Zoom - free - great for screen capture not just meetings, you just run a meeting with just yourself. You get your little picture of you talking, and you can pause and resume the recording. Makes lovely small files, great for streaming.

- Medial (if available in your institution) picture of you talking, pause and resume recordings, and uploads straight to the database.
- Screencast-o-matic (a favourite with some colleagues). Not free, but you can use a trial and then perhaps get a paid personal or institution account if you like it.
- Flashback Express (free) – this is a very good solution if your computer has limited CPU and RAM. If like me you were stuck with having to use a Win 7 home premium with 4GB ram then you wouldn't be able to do much with live video, so try this for good quality screen capture (minus talking head, so no webcam draining your processing power). I had to run Adobe software which is itself very bloated for CPU drain, so this was a great trade off to create screen capture videos at decent quality and be able to run the Adobe CC stuff as well.

File sizes

Keep file size as small as you can. Try to avoid files that are more than 200mb. If this seems impossible, go and download Handbrake, and 'compress' your video files, use the 'web optimised' setting. It's the only box you should need to tick. The new files it makes will be much smaller in size, and shouldn't look much worse in terms of quality. If you do that, a 200mb file goes down to about 80mb. Much better for Internet streaming by the learners.

Storing video

Usually you will have a choice of where to store and link to your files. Our institution has Medial to host our files, and this system also uses a good search engine to find material by other staff. it links well into our VLE (Blackboard). You will very likely use other systems to host files. If you're stuck and need to find your own solution, consider Google Drive, using publish-to-web links to embed your files, or, persuade your institution to buy a Vimeo Plus account, then link or embed those files. Note I'm not recommending YouTube. I think that's a last resort, mainly because of uncontrolled advertising content, but of course, it's up to you.

The Learners

Learners are all in different situations at home – houses or flats with multiple other people in them, looking after children, or sick relatives, nowhere quiet to join in a webinar, lots of interruptions, not able to share their video or audio (or even no laptop, just a phone, which is not ideal). All these things can indicate that live sessions are not a perfect solution, and *my own view* is that key learning content should be offered outside of live sessions, even if live sessions are recorded. Learners need us to help them focus on the important bits of the learning, and when we are not there in person, we need to use digital techniques to try to make up for this loss. Again, good video of strong summary content is a way to help with this.

The other big issue of distance learning with a distributed group of students is *social presence*. This is essential, as I said at the start, and running some kind of live session every week is a great way to foster group bonding at distance. I think this can be done fairly effectively just using audio if your or their bandwidth is an issue. Think of it as managing an audio focus group discussion and keeping a keen eye on who is raising their hand, who is speaking, engage closely with what they say, getting them to engage back. Getting *discussion* going, not only a Q&A, is a very fruitful way of increasing social presence for everyone, between everyone, not only thinking about your relationship with your learners, but their relationship with each other. Meeting every week to engage with the students and them with each other is for me the number one reason to have a live session.

Another thing: set up a *virtual hangout room* that learners can use with each other without tutors being there. They can share screens, help each other with work – the way they would in real life – and they can just hang out, gossip, waste time.

General tips

- Use slides that can be easily accessible – Speakerdeck or Google Slides. Avoid PowerPoint. Most kids won't have Office 365 on their devices.
- Use PDF files instead of Word documents, so the files can be easily opened in a browser, on a phone or a

laptop.

- Don't overdo the amount of content you provide.
- Don't expect any printing to be done!
- Have fun - really important, for you and for your learners. Enjoy the discovery together of what works and what doesn't. Be honest with your learners, that you're learning too.

Summing up

My next plan is to prep my short video lecture and have it up online before the live audio discussion. This way, I can refer to things that at least some of the learners have seen before. I won't over do my own content, but will try to use the tools I've got at my disposal. And I will try to use a small bit of video live, to have fun, laugh at desktoys, share silly jokes, change icons and avatars, just to enjoy the company of others in my learning networks.