

Teaching Methods: Building presence and rapport via videoconferencing

Jo Earp

Thank you for downloading this episode of the Teaching Methods podcast series, brought to you by Teacher magazine, I'm Jo Earp. Videoconferencing technology has changed the face of distance education, but teaching to a camera rather than face-to-face requires additional skills. In this episode, I'm joined by Nicki Rehn, Assistant Professor of Education at Ambrose University in Calgary, Canada. Rehn and colleagues Dorit Maor and Andrew McConney, from Murdoch University in Australia, have studied how educators delivering school lessons by videoconference can best build a classroom presence and rapport with their remote students.

Jo Earp: Nicki, welcome to *Teacher* magazine. The participants then, they were all secondary school teachers and students weren't they. In what circumstances were they using this video conferencing technology?

Nicki Rehn: So, they were actually across different three rural districts in western Canada. I'm actually originally from Australia and I grew up in a rural area in Western Australia, so I'm very passionate about reaching rural kids in dispersed areas.

In Canada, education is a little bit different, it's a bit more decentralised in terms of its administration. We have these school divisions and the urban areas have [high populations] and obviously big school divisions, but the rural divisions have struggled to maintain a variety of course offerings to high school students in their really small schools. And sometimes, in the case of this study, there are just a few students at each school.

... There were situations where a teacher would have a normal class, sometimes up to 30 students right in front of them, and then they may have another class of six or seven in a remote location. I saw some where there'd be three or four students in front of them and then five different locations also videoing in. And then I also saw two teachers who were just operating out of a single office and would teach to students who were in an entire classroom somewhere else.

So, yeah, there were lots of different things I observed – most of it was focused though on that, what we call, 'simultaneous delivery' of face-to-face and videoconference. And that had some very interesting things that came up. We found what I'd considered to be called 'non-parallel delivery', because like you said you're doing two different kinds of teaching at the same time; you're interacting with kids face-to-face and that has its own challenges and pedagogical challenges, and then you're also dealing with a two dimensional set of students that are remote and, of course, you're two-dimensional to those students as well.

JE: One of the things that I picked up on in the report was like you say the face-to-face and online at the same time, some of the students felt like they were just 'in the audience', so to speak, and they felt more included depending on where the camera was placed didn't they?

NR: Yeah, exactly. It was quite a surprising finding. I was watching one class over an entire year and at the first semester the teacher had the camera at the back of the classroom, so the television at the back of the classroom behind her 27 or so students. And the remote students knew that's where their camera or their TV was placed. And so their peers, they could turn around and look at their peers that were remote but they basically were in the back of the classroom. And the teacher actually thought that perhaps the students would feel more far away from her because as I said the camera and the TV were way back in the classroom. So the next semester, she moved the camera and the TV right in front of her desk and that way she could more quickly turn to the camera and address her students – but interestingly, the students didn't like it. I asked them to compare the two semesters and they said suddenly they felt like 27 students were looking at the back of their heads, even though they knew they were two dimensional, they felt very intimidated by this idea of where they were placed in the classroom, even on a two dimensional screen. And while they were able to see their teacher more clearly, in terms of a class community they felt better about actually having the TV [and camera] back in the back of the classroom. That was very surprising because I was expecting them to prefer to be closer to their teacher.

JE: In terms of videoconferencing, that throws up a few challenges in terms of developing the 'presence' in the classroom and also that rapport with the students. What did you find from your study in terms of some of the challenges that were highlighted?

NR: We call this construct presence, which has been talked about in different ways in the literature of distance ed before. Basically, the way I conceptualised it was the idea of feeling that you're there physically when you're not there. So it's like bridging that what I call a 'pedagogical divide' that's often a real divide of hundreds and hundreds of kilometres. And, the challenges were obviously like you said building that face-to-face rapport, particularly between teacher and student.

There were some very real logistical challenges as you can well imagine, like just making available assignments and there was a lot of stuff you could put onto a learning management system and transfer fairly easily that way but when it comes to exams and tests and assignments back and forth that had to be hand delivered there was some logistical challenges that required a lot of preparation.

Teachers as well felt like they couldn't teach in as much of an ad-hoc way; there's a certain degree of, you know, you prepare as a teacher and then there's a whole lot of stuff that happens in the classroom that you roll with ... but when you're sort of 'performing' on a screen as well, there had to be a lot more preparation. So teachers struggled with the challenge of a lot more upfront preparation for these lectures per se.

JE: And, for those who are using this kind of teaching method, this kind of technology, what about practical tips? Your research highlighted some pretty easy things actually that teachers can do to help build that rapport didn't it?

NR: They seem like very obvious things but they're stuff that you have to pay attention to in your day to day classes when you're working a videoconference.

The first one, for example, would be this sense of overcompensation for the remote students when you're building relationships, and that includes almost overusing their names. Normally when someone comes into a class you do a lot of nodding, saying 'oh hi, how's your day?', but in the videoconference it really helped if you actually called out the name. You know 'Jimmy, great to see you in class today' and 'how was your weekend Jimmy?'. That really helps that person feel like they are real and they exist and they're not just a two-dimensional screen in the back of the room.

There are some other things in terms of creating that sense of ... being a 3D person in real space. To actually give them clues about your space and where you are – talking about what it looks like outside the window for example, what kind of classroom you're in, using the camera to show your remote students the space that they're being videoed into is really helpful, and helping your students right there in the classroom to know how to relate to the students on the screen is helpful too. So, getting them to use their names really helped to bridge that gap.

Some of the other practical ways that teachers can help to mitigate some of the challenges include just thinking about the act of teaching on a screen and what that looks like on the other side. That has to do with how you use your voice, how you move about the room and also just trying to humanise a little bit the presentation by using humour and using self-disclosure – so, telling stories about yourself. Students love to hear about their teachers, but it's particularly powerful over a videoconference, it personalises the situation. We found that students really appreciated it when their teachers told jokes and actually had some downtime in the videoconference so it wasn't just pure lecture, there was some downtime where students could maybe make some jokes.

I know my 'near' students used to play practical jokes on my 'far' students by putting signs up in front of the camera and making faces at them. It seems like some silliness by Grade 11 and 12 students, but actually it really helped to build community in a sense of both students being real to each other. So, yeah, teachers need to be aware of the fact that they are being videoed in and kind of consider what it looks like on the other side of the screen.

Watching themselves back on the video was really helpful. They get to see that you don't want to be running all over the classroom and bouncing around too much – it's difficult to watch that on a screen. So, yeah, a lot of just basic video screen rules apply in that situation that teachers don't normally think about when they're in front of a face-to-face class.

JE: One of the other things I was thinking about was you mentioned about voice and moving around the classroom and so on. And, as a teacher you'd not normally ... in terms of feedback

it would be more informal, you might give a little nod or a look. Of course they're not going to be able to see that are they?

NR: No, exactly. And giving feedback or being able to pick up those subtle emotive clues ... are students not getting it or are they a bit confused, a bit angry, messing around, getting bored? They are more difficult to pick up.

Some of the strategies I saw that were working really well was one teacher kept a list of all her students and she actually would text her students back and forth – she didn't have a lot of students on the remote side – she was able to quickly send texts to them on their phones and ... watch it beep and sort of a call to attention and they're [students] able to just quietly and privately text back saying 'no I'm a little bit confused, can you just clarify that question?'. She found that very effective for making students feel comfortable to ask questions and to seek feedback and for her to be able to give feedback without it being publicly broadcast.

This sort of public broadcast piece is very difficult for the remote students because you don't want to put your hand up in front of everybody and say 'I don't get it' and have a teacher publicly live say 'well, let me give you some extra explanation for that' – for some students that's very intimidating. So there's a lot of strategies around using alternate technologies or supporting technologies to help give feedback and very immediately actually help those remote students.

JE: That's great. Well, we've covered some of the main points from the study and we'll put the link onto the journal publication as well, which has got a lot more detail in, with this transcript as well. For now, Assistant Professor Nicki Rehn thanks very much for joining *Teacher magazine*.

NR: Excellent, thank you very much. I appreciate chatting with you.

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References

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