IC27720: Seminar 4

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Topic/theme:	Introduction to video conferencing
Focus:	What constitutes good practice and effective communication in a video conference?

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1. **Introduction to video conferencing**

Advances in video conferencing now mean that when the equipment is made available, conferences themselves can take place via internet connections at a very low cost. This means that international communication can now take place easily and effectively within university settings where using the facilities is actively promoted. The aim of this document is to prepare you for the first conferences by looking into some of the organisational requirements and behavioural expectations and communication constraints that are essential for a successful video conference. Within the first conference, we will get used to communicating with each other and if time allows we will use some of your project ideas for discussion. The following links provide further links and information on video conferencing.

http://users.aber.ac.uk/jpm/invite/index.htm

2. **Time management**

Time management is very important in video conferencing. The suites must be booked in advance and the link depends on availability of rooms and technical support. Technical support is available on site, but also depends on the network being used, which is supported as far away as Edinburgh in Scotland.

The link also depends on punctuality at both ends as there may be time differences between the two locations. If you are late to a conference, interruptions are very uncomfortable and surprisingly noisy and disruptive. When people have settled into

the beginning of a video conference they need to concentrate quite a lot on the communication for reasons we will discuss in section 4.

3. Requirements of a video conference

People

- **Chairperson:** this person will chair the conference and organise the overall agenda.
- **Facilitators:** a facilitator should be present in each conference suite being used (could also be the chairperson in one suite).
- **Participants:** these are the people who will take part in the conference.

Agenda

- **The agenda** is a plan of exactly what is expected to take place. It will include arrangements for seating, timing, use of equipment and roles of participants. Facilitators work with the same agenda, which is controlled by the chairperson. It is usually characterised by

  - short presentations
  - controlled contributions (one speaker at a time)
  - pre-read content where possible so that critical awareness is apparent from audience
  - careful timing

Equipment

- **The equipment** used includes the conferencing facilities, which also includes use of computers and projection equipment for a variety of multimedia presentation formats. Web-sites and PowerPoint presentations are commonly used. This needs to be written into the agenda and participants must plan well in advance for this purpose.

4. Communication in video conferences

Etiquette is very important in video conferences. The unspoken rules of verbal communication in face to face conversations and discussions do not necessarily apply here and it is easy to disrupt a video conference. On the surface, it should be treated as a more sensitive communication environment, and as such, careful consideration must be given to its ecology.

- Make sure you are in the picture
- Do not move too much—it is distracting to watch
- Do not move or rock furniture
- Be careful with unnecessary noises—microphones are very sensitive and even a cough sounds like a car crash
- Do not whisper or have conversations with partners, they will be heard at the other end of the connection
- Speak normally
- Switch off mobile phones
- Brightly coloured and/or reflective clothes can cause viewing problems on the TV screen
- Look at the camera as much as possible rather than the screen. Eye contact is gained through the camera lens, not the TV monitor

Active listening is very important. Active listening is letting people finish what they have to say before interrupting and also being able to summarise the essence of what they have said. It is more important in video conferencing as there is a slight time delay so it is not always possible to tell who is speaking from a group as facial and body signals are more obscured in what is essentially a low quality image environment.

Be conscious of other participants. It is important not to speak too much and allow interaction with other participants. Be aware that some people may appear only in the background as silent observers. So if you are planning any presentation or discussion points, work out in advance who will say what and also who will answer questions on given subjects.

5. Politeness as a technologically mediated social construct in video conferencing

During our series of video conferences, we will be exchanging ideas on student projects, which will provide content and subject for our discussions. We will also be looking at how we communicate in an appropriate manner in an intercultural, technologically mediated social space.

Consider the following points, which were not written with video conferencing in mind, and how they reflect any of the points about technological constraints and etiquette on pages 1-3.

> "In terms of relations, formal situations are characterized by an exceptional orientation to and marking of position, status, and 'face'; power and social distance are overt and consequently there is a strong tendency towards *politeness.* Politeness is based upon recognition of differences of power, degrees of social distance… and oriented to reproducing them without change."
>
> (Fairclough, 1989: 66)

What Norman Fairclough is arguing here is that the formality of the situation and the social relations between communicators, will determine the use of polite language structures—and that it intended to maintain a social distance within the social context. The context in question here is the pairing of two university student groups by video conference. While students across the world share certain social characteristics of informality, the distance between the two remote sites (Brno and Aberystwyth) limits any opportunity for face to face communication. As such many of the non-verbal communication signals (facial characteristics, body language, gesture) are reduced or lost and it is easier for misunderstandings to occur.

There is an artificially induced formality in video conferencing as the usual turn-taking, spontaneous negotiating and use of humour can be accentuated is being impolite when faced with the constraints of the video conferencing environment. Within this there is also need to consider pace, clarity and volume of speaking and the perception of making an effort to be clearly understood. There is also the shared

use of subject vocabularies determined by each of the formal topics under discussion: are all definitions shared definitions, or do we need to negotiate different perspectives (cf. Fairclough, 1989: 66)?

How much do we need to use hedging or avoidance strategies to ensure our critical points are appropriate? This includes use of modal verbs (might, may, could, etc.), adverbs (probably vs. obviously), euphemisms ('that's a challenging point' vs. 'I really can't accept your view'), among other language strategies. Each of these allows the listener to respond in ways that are less likely to limit or offend the speaker in any way. They also allow room for further discussion and negotiation, an important aim in our video conference series.

Bibliography

Fairclough, N. (1989) *Language and Power.* London: Longman

Invite: An Innovative Learning Infrastructure (2008) "Invite video conferencing village"

[online] http://users.aber.ac.uk/jpm/invite/index.htm (Accessed 11/10/2018).

Further reading in language, discourse and framing of ideas: to be used in further discussions

Cameron, D. (2000) *Good To Talk? Living and Working in a Communication Culture.* London: Sage Publications.

Janicki, K. (2015) *Language and Conflict: Selected Issues.* London: Palgrave.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (2003) *Metaphors We Live By* (with new afterword). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mooney, A., Stilwell Peccei, J., Labelle, S., Engøy Henriksen, B., Eppler, E., Irwin, A., Pichler, P., Preece, S. & Soden, S. (2011) *Language, Society and Power: An Introduction* (3rd edn.). London: Routledge.

Discussion and procedure for first video conference

John Morgan

Topic/theme: Introductory methods for clear presentation procedures in initial video conferences

Focus: A community narrative method

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1. **Video conferencing**

Have you taken part in video conferencing before? This can include uses of web cams on personal computers or synchronous mobile video phone calls. "Synchronous" means communication that happens live, so video messages that are recorded and then sent to another person cannot be included (they are "asynchronous").

If you have you may have some perceptions of what it is like to communicate visually without being in the same physical space. If not you may have heard others speak about it, or you may be able to imagine what the advantages and difficulties may be.

You are going to engage a group of people in another country in a discussion of your project topic.

- What do you think this will be like?
- While this is dynamic and has obvious advantages for communication, there will also be difficult aspects.
- Think of the possible difficulties to presenting and discussing through this media.
- How could you overcome those difficulties?
- Can you think of a good way to organise your presentation?

Video discussion task

In the first video conference we will work in established project groups to present ideas to our partner project groups at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. Follow the checklist below to work out how you could begin to structure the ideas for presentation.

Identify a person to introduce the group

- Who are the group members?
- What are their nationalities?
- What are their areas of study?
- What is the working title and/or focus of the project?
- ***Create*** an extremely short summary of each aspect of the topic that the group would like to discuss. You should be able to remember this adequately enough so that you don't have to read it from a paper.
- ***The first person*** (not necessarily the person who introduces) should briefly present her/his own ideas.
- ***The second person*** should continue, but this time she or he could make comparison to the first person's talk to identify the progression of ideas and relationships if the topic has varied.
- ***The third person*** should continue in the same manner and finally one of the group members should summarise by bringing the presentation to a conclusion, after which wider discussion can take place.

TIME LIMIT: We have booked the facilities for one hour and forty five minutes, from 11:15 – 13:00 UK time (one hour later in Brno) so we need to set a time limit of approximately 20 minutes per group—*including questions and answers*—We can be flexible when we know exact numbers of project teams involved.

SEQUENCE: As we don't have a list of topics so far, or the exact number of project groups, a possible sequence for presentations is to alternate between universities to balance the flow of communication.