

Telehealth Facilitator Orientation and Training Manual

Videoconferencing Notes For Successful Telehealth Programming



The Quebec Learners' Network

August 23, 2006

1) Presenting and facilitating in a videoconference

Coping with video compression

Because compressed video can sometimes use a relatively narrow bandwidth (as narrow as 128 kilo-bits per second) the quality of the connection is not of TV-broadcast quality. These tips are useful for coping with some of the difficulties this reduced quality may cause:

Video quality

Since motion is not handled as well as with TV, rapid movements produce a blurred effect at the far-end. Strategies to deal with this include:

- Relaxing – avoiding rapid movements, like shaking your head vigorously;
- Avoiding pacing around or erratic hand gestures – use body language in a definite way, e.g., taking one or two distinct steps forward or backwards, holding a specific hand gesture for an extra second of emphasis;
- Wearing solid colors and simple jewelry – flashing jewelry or bright colours (including white and stripes) do not transmit well in compressed video;
- Monitoring yourself for moving off-camera or at an angle that transmits too light or dark on screen;
- If possible, having the participants make use of visual aids (show what they are talking about) on a document camera or slide;
- Having your materials ready at hand and organized.

Audio quality

You will notice a delay between the time a person talks at your site, and the time when he or she is actually heard at the remote site. This delay is just long enough to cause participants to talk over one another, unless they learn to adjust to the effect. Here are some tips:

- Pause when you expect a response from the far-end site;
- Wait until the speaker at the far-end has finished talking before you reply;
- Speak at a comfortable pace, not too quickly;
- Speak clearly, but in your natural voice at a comfortable volume;
- Follow a clear outline, but do not read your notes aloud;
- Try to be relaxed and informal – videoconferences are discussions, not broadcasts.

Voice animation, energy, and enthusiasm are critical motivating factors for participation, so voice quality (pitch, tone, volume, pausing, and pacing) is important. You should maintain a greater level of clarity than communicating over the phone with a single caller.

Turn-taking in a conference

Turn-taking practices are based on common courtesy to the other people participating in the conference. It is important to learn when to turn your microphone on and off and manage your "Mute" button effectively.

During the conference

1. While you are presenting information, have the remote site keep their **Mute** button on. The microphones are very sensitive and if remote-site participants are flipping pages, moving around, or just coughing, the other site will hear them over than the presenter.
2. When a participant has a question or comment:
Remind people to say: "*Excuse me, (subject's name). This is (participant's name)...*" to ensure clear identification for all listeners.
3. In an open discussion:
If you ask a site to respond, make sure the **Mute** is off, and encourage the respondents to talk directly to you and your local group.

The far-site facilitators' role in assisting videoconferencing interaction

The far-site facilitators act as local representatives of the host site. As such, they should:

- Stay in the conference room for the duration of the on-line time, and avoid taking or making outside (non workshop-related) phone calls during that time.
- Inform the host site immediately if the view or sound on their screen is less than its normal good quality.
- Inform you tactfully when the far-site participants do not seem to understand a statement or concept being presented
- Encourage the participants to clarify their questions or statements when they think that the presenter/host will not understand them.
- Gently yet persistently remind participants to speak directly to the camera.
- Assist, if possible, in the transmission of the presenter's concepts by making some basic notes on a flip chart.

It's important to remember that even though the presenter will have visual contact with the far-site participants, he or she cannot presume to have the same sense of what is "going on" as a far-site facilitator has. Particular emotions, confusion, body language, or off-camera distractions are not always obvious. Thus, it is the facilitator's responsibility to inform you, tactfully, of the individual and group dynamics occurring at the far-site.

It's also the facilitator's (and presenter's) job to set the example of appropriate conferencing behaviour to the participants. They should show themselves on the camera when speaking, and be clear and articulate in their speech and choice of words to communicate as effectively as possible. In a videoconference (as on TV), appearing "natural" takes a bit of work!

Enhancement of interpersonal skills

De-personalization can occur due to the presenter's lack of physical presence at the remote sites. If at first the participants seem to respond to you as simply an image on screen, you can help them overcome this. Develop an environment of trust and co-operation. Have the participants learn people's names and address them directly.

Some participants in your videoconference may hesitate in discussions because of their shyness about appearing on camera. Presenters can encourage interactivity by getting responses early in the session before the participants acquire a passive attitude.

If possible, get to know participants at the beginning by having them introduce each other, incorporating some social icebreaker or technique at the beginning of the session.

Encourage the participants to volunteer as much information as possible when they speak. One-word answers (*Yes... No... Dunno...*) are not usually very helpful.

The obvious strength of videoconferencing is its potential for immediate interaction. However, interaction doesn't always "just happen." You need to provide opportunities for participation by planning for and constantly encouraging it:

- Asking participants at the beginning to be prepared to discuss specific topics
- Distributing pre-readings or questions
- Drawing on common interests
- Directing questions to specific groups or sites (but not specific individuals)
- Asking for comments frequently, provide informal question/answer periods, or use questionnaires to receive feedback
- Being aware of microphone "mice" and microphone "hogs"! – try to balance their participation
- Asking monitoring questions with the "minimum" reply to save time (e.g. "Is there anyone who *did not* understand?" vs. "Does everybody understand?")

And finally... pause regularly

Participants sometimes report that it is very difficult to interject questions while the presenter is speaking, particularly if he or she does not pause between sentences, paragraphs, or ideas. Much of what the presenter is saying will be missed if participants are busy listening hard for a pause that is long enough for them to break in with a question.

Periods of silence are normal in videoconferencing, as people need time to think and to respond, so allow at least 10 seconds for participants to answer questions or to form their questions for you. Allowing for cultural or language differences, you may need longer.

(Even if no questions are asked, a pause allows for absorption of what has been said.)

2) Brainstorming solutions to communication problems

What solutions might you offer to the following problems that may occur during workshops?

- A shy participant would like to ask a question but is hesitant at the thought of the camera focusing on him or her.
- A participant who wasn't present for the beginning of the conference says: "I don't know what to do."
- A remote-site, whose participants tend to be quieter than the other sites, seems to have drifted towards a passivity similar to that of watching TV.
- One participant has brought her two young children to the workshop, and the other participants at the site are being (pleasantly) distracted by them.
- A regular participant is considering leaving the program, but he or she is not sure.
- A participant keeps asking for additional attention, even though he or she has been present for the workshop explanations of the work.

Are there some other situations that might impede smooth communications with your participants?

Training participants how to use the technology is only one part of the challenge; your real contribution is adapting your presenting methods to fully exploit the potential of videoconferencing. Without these adaptations, which will usually require increased participation, the system risks being under-used. Videoconferencing requires additional skills to those normally possessed by a workshop presenter.

3) Working with remote-site facilitators

The facilitators' role in managing videoconferencing workshop behaviour

A facilitator can act effectively as your on-site representative. This does not mean that they present the workshop! It does mean, however, that they should:

- Stay in the workshop for the duration of the on-line time, and avoid taking or making outside (non workshop-related) phone calls during that time. This policy is especially important when there are guest speakers, tests or exams – if an emergency calls any of them away from your workshop during these times, they must inform you, and announce their return.
- Inform you immediately if the view or sound on their screen is less than its normal good quality. This includes if the presenter appears off-centre or too light or dark on their screen, or appears to be wearing distracting jewelry or bright colours that do not transmit well in compressed video.
- Observe workshop protocol by muting their site microphone when a participant is speaking at another site. Not only does this eliminate background noise so that the presenter can hear the participant more clearly, it also allows that particular participant (as the current source of sound input) to appear on the presenter's view-screen.
- Inform you tactfully when the participants do not seem to understand a statement or concept being presented.
- Encourage the participants to clarify their questions or statements when they think that the you will not understand them, and ask the participants to address you by name, and to identify themselves while speaking (e.g., "*Peter, this is Abel...*").
- Gently, yet persistently, remind participants of their need to follow behaviour protocol during the videoconferences.
- Also remind them of the presenters' due dates for assignments and of upcoming tests. Large hand-drawn wall-calendars are excellent for this - they can have the participants write in the due dates themselves.

It's important to remember that even though you, the presenter, will have visual contact with the participants, you cannot presume to have the same sense of what is "going on" at a group site as each facilitator has. Particular emotions, confusion, body language, or off-camera distractions are not always obvious to you at the far-end. Thus, it is the facilitator's responsibility to keep you informed, tactfully and privately, of the individual and group dynamics of your participants' experience in these workshops.

The facilitators must inform you whenever someone arrives who wasn't in their room at the beginning of the workshop. This could mean an invited guest, an uninvited visitor, or a participant arriving late. It is extremely important that you be informed at all times exactly who is watching and listening, both to avoid confusion and to respect everyone's privacy of communication. The same policy applies to you as a presenter: always inform the participants if someone is in the room with you.

It's the facilitator's job to set the example of appropriate conferencing behaviour to our participants. They should show themselves on the camera when speaking, and be clear and articulate in their speech and choice of words. If all this seems "unnatural", remind them that we the presenters are using the same techniques to communicate as effectively as possible in a videoconference (as in the world of television), being "natural" takes a bit of work!

Here are a few other facilitator guidelines related to privacy:

- Don't discuss administrative matters during on-line time - this time is for the participants. It's also sometimes easy to forget that the participants (at every site) are listening. A short technical "testing/check-in period" before every scheduled multi-site conference allows plenty of time for taking care of administrative matters with facilitators.
- Similarly, don't discuss (or allow the facilitator to discuss) an absent participant's problems in front of the rest of the workshop.
- If there is something urgent to communicate during workshop time that is unrelated to the workshop itself, make a private phone call to the facilitator.

Communication between all people involved in delivering the workshops is essential to its success. The many technological, administrative, and logistical needs of distance education require everyone to e-mail, phone, or fax each other frequently to keep each other aware of program needs, develop the program, and deal with any problems as soon as they occur.

4) Helping troubleshoot technical difficulties in the workshops

Technical maintenance

- Set up, operate, maintain, and troubleshoot new workshop equipment
- Anticipate and deal with those technical problems that you can handle yourself
- Obtain a commitment in advance for technical assistance from your local administrator

Troubleshooting procedures and back-up system The PictureTel systems are quite reliable. If, however, a technical problem occurs during a conference follow these guidelines for solving it:

1. Inform the facilitators immediately, and see if you can work the problem out together without disrupting the workshop. If this cannot be done, use your back-up audio-only system (i.e., an office speaker-phone or a POLYCOM audio-disc) and dial in on a separate line to continue the workshop.
2. If you think the problem is due to bad phone-line connections or difficulty connecting to the "bridge" call the bridge's technical assistant.
3. If the whole system is malfunctioning, inform your Distance Education coordinator and request technical assistance to solve the problem. Also inform the other scheduled presenters of the problem.

Cooperating with technical assistants

Always volunteer as much information as you can about the conditions surrounding the technical problem for which you're seeking assistance. Since most technical assistance can only be offered by telephone, simply saying "*It doesn't work*", and then sitting passively back while someone who is not there tries to figure out the problem will not get you anywhere.

Provide answers to these questions when communicating your equipment problems to someone over the phone:

- Is the piece of equipment "on"? Was there a power failure, and the equipment simply failed to turn itself back on?
- Does the piece of equipment work at all? If so, under what conditions? If not, when did the problem first occur?
- If the problem is a recurring one, under what conditions does it appear?
- What are the *effects* of the problem? (Describe as many effects as you can identify).
- Have you heard of any other site experiencing similar problems?
- And so on...