



Facing the camera

Interacting with students online requires a different set of skills to being at the front of a real-life classroom. **Simon Day** offers a few tips that can help you make the transition

If you're a teacher, you were probably expecting the routine of teaching to be fairly stable for the next however many years. Go to work, teach lessons, come home. I was. Of course, there are the 'expected' changes such as deadline pressures, marking, exams and schemes of work, but I don't think any of

us saw Covid-19 coming! It can be overwhelming to think that we, the teachers and trainers, have now become the students. We have had to rapidly upskill ourselves to support and educate others effectively.

Once I adopted online communication, I quickly discovered that a couple of strategies that have served me well as a

teacher are equally vital when communicating via technology. Although, in my view, online conversation will never match standing up in front of a class of students, I hope to share a few pointers that might help settle some nerves and help you realise how many transferable skills you already have as an educator.

1 GET THE RIGHT KIT

Communication is highly nuanced. When we speak in person, it is much easier to read facial expressions, observe gestures, detect body language and discern variations in vocal tone. All of these combine to give us a clearer picture of precisely what is being said by how it is being said.

Online communication can raise barriers to detecting some of these nuances. Poor video quality may obscure facial expression, intermittent audio reception may betray the subtle variations of the voice, and restrictive camera angles may hide the true meaning of body language or gestures.

Although it can require a small financial investment, an HD webcam, good pair of over-ear headphones and USB microphone are three pieces of equipment that have notably improved my online communication experience: I can see more clearly, hear more clearly and speak more clearly.

My hands are also free to use appropriate accompanying gestures, not being encumbered with wires or handheld equipment. I would estimate the total cost at around £100, but the equipment has proved invaluable. I highly recommend this investment – anything that improves the user experience to improve retention is worth investing in to facilitate a more immersive experience for all participants.

2

PREPARE AS YOU WOULD IN CLASS

If you were going to stand up in front of a class and deliver a session, how much preparation would you put into it? It is easy to think that because we are in a more familiar, comfortable space with no live audience, we can get away with less preparation. This is dangerous ground.

We don't need days and weeks of rehearsal, but reviewing key objectives in advance and having a clear structure to an online session will also communicate to students that we care about them and ensure the session content is better received and retained.

3

LOOK THE PART

Call me old-school, but if I'm in a classroom teaching, it's a white shirt and a tie. If I'm online in a professional capacity, I dress in a professional manner. Sometimes a tie, other times a shirt and jacket, but I deliberately dress and groom to say: "Here I am. I've tried. I care."

Sometimes we must reverse the situation and think about how we will be received by our students – do they get the impression we care about them by the language we use, our mannerisms and our dress? How would we feel if someone turned up to a call speaking, acting and looking like we do? If there is even a slight amount of discomfort at this suggestion, perhaps some revisions are in order.



4

EYE CONTACT

This should be maintained 30 per cent of the time for a conversation to be deemed fit for purpose. To establish and maintain relationships of trust and respect, this rises to between 60 and 70 per cent.

In online communication, it is incredibly tempting to look at the face on screen for much of the time, thinking you are making eye contact.


You are not. Eye contact is made by looking at the camera lens. Stick a Post-it note or arrow near the lens (or, if you're like me, a pair of sticky eyes) as a reminder that when you speak, this is where you should look. It takes practice, but it will pay dividends as students will feel more involved in the experience.

5

VOCAL VARIETY

When you deliver a live lesson or presentation, people can see your entire person and can therefore read facial expression, body language and gesture. Speaking on-camera limits this, which places more emphasis on the voice.

Varying pitch, pace and volume can help you tell your story with greater authenticity and emphasise key points with greater authority. It will require an investment of energy and commitment, but your voice will need to compensate for those aspects of communication hindered by the limitations of online platforms to help deliver your message with clarity.

If you are delighted, sound delighted. If you are optimistic, sound optimistic. If you are concerned, sound concerned. This will make it much easier for participants to correctly interpret your intended message. 



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