



Are you ready for your close-up?

If it weren't for new technologies, online video calls would be impossible. But how do we ensure these go smoothly?

A.

Here we go again. The online class should have started ten minutes ago, but Iva can't find the volume control, Eric reckons his mic isn't working and Simon keeps losing his connection. Those people who were ready to go from the start are becoming exasperated. 'If I'd known the class wasn't going to start on time, I'd have stayed in bed,' someone mumbles. At the same time, people are talking over one another in an effort to direct the ones having trouble. 'You need to "unmute"', 'Just click on the gallery icon!' they huff, well aware that time is moving on. But no one should assume that every attendee has the same level of familiarity with an online app. And all these problems could probably have been avoided if someone had run a session on how to navigate the software. If a training isn't possible, hosts and guests can always try out the 'test feature' that many platforms offer. It allows users to try things out before they join a real video call with peers, friends or colleagues. So if you're intending to take part in a video call with a number of people, this is a feature you might want to recommend.

B.

But even when there are no audio and video quality challenges, the whole experience of communicating via a video call can be unexpectedly demanding, and natural interaction can suffer. For example, video creates a kind of filter, meaning we have to work twice as hard to interpret non-verbal cues and work out the feelings or intentions they convey. Facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice – all things that assist with face-to-face encounters – are more difficult to access and process online, and we expend a lot of energy searching for these clues. Introverts in particular are often affected, as they are modest in their body language and others may not pick up on the fact they are waiting to contribute. 'Well, if Nadia *will* sit there in silence, of course no one will notice her,' I heard another student say recently. But reserved types like Nadia may well have valid points to make or vital questions to ask and it's wrong that they are overlooked. We may be connected, but the unfamiliarity of the medium prevents us becoming involved in a natural and relaxed way.

C.

There is also the fact that when people engage in face-to-face conversations, they often pause – either to give themselves time to think or let someone else have a turn. Online, a pause can feel like a sudden, jarring stop. There's hesitation as everyone wonders why it's all gone quiet. Someone eventually pipes up with 'So, what's next?', hoping it's the appropriate thing to say. The anxiety and discomfort these pauses cause not only compounds the stresses placed on the attendees, but also creates an atmosphere that can be perceived as less friendly or focused.

D.

Making the online experience even more exhausting is the anxiety caused by being on camera, with a group of people scrutinising you and the accompanying self-consciousness and discomfort. It's almost inevitable that the social pressure caused by this feeling of being 'on stage' means participants feel compelled to perform. The fact that we can often see our own face in the gallery as we strive to complete this 'performance' just makes things worse. Perhaps, if more people realised how universally disliked the gallery feature is, they would not insist on using it.

E.

So how do we maximise opportunities for successful communication via a video call? For a start, it's vital that everyone joining a meeting knows what to expect and what is expected of them. For informal chats, a group might agree that they will add a virtual background to add interest and humour in order to alleviate the strangeness of the encounter. For both formal and casual meetings, there is the option to switch off the camera entirely and agree to voice-only conversation, but again, this needs to be decided beforehand. Educational or business meetings must also have a clear agenda. If the purpose of these meetings is vague, people don't know what they are expected to contribute. Furthermore, allocating speaking time to each person will help ensure equal contributions and make the most of each speaker's time. This also avoids having to drop hints when a speaker is droning on and dominating the conversation.

F.

Successful video communication also requires familiarity with the protocols. Certainly, there are already a number of dos and don'ts emerging. For example, if you are in a work situation, you will be expected to look relatively professional and ensure that there are no distractions in the background. There are similar expectations in educational contexts: students are expected to have all their class materials ready and not to join meetings in their pyjamas, or text their friends. Sitting forward on a chair implies that a person is switched on and paying attention to the speaker, whereas slumping back on the sofa gives the opposite impression. Participants are also strongly advised not to send negative comments via private chat messages. If someone takes a screenshot of the message, it can be shared with the entire group, leaving the original poster in a very awkward position.