The Need for Intentionally Equitable Hospitality in Video Conferencing

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As someone who has been living large chunks of my life online since before the COVID-19 pandemic, I experience Zoom fatigue (see also Lovink, this volume) as much as the next person, but I also actively resist making any meeting, presentation, workshop, or class session that I lead contribute to other people's Zoom fatigue. Before I share details, let's acknowledge that some elements of Zoom fatigue are just part and parcel of video conferencing: sitting for a long time in front of a screen, exhausting your eyes looking at it constantly, and trying to be social and compensate for the lack of physical togetherness that tends to give us (at least the extroverts among us!) a special kind of energy. Let's also acknowledge that some of the solutions to this are simple ones that we forget to do. For example, inviting participants to get up and move around as part of an activity in your workshop, or inviting people to write some stuff on paper and look away from the screen during a synchronous class meeting—we just forget to do these things when we are on a video conference. But there is no real reason to ignore the bodies behind the screens. Giving others breaks; giving ourselves breaks; and importantly, giving people grace with cameras (see also Della Ratta, this volume) when they want to keep their cameras off, whether it exhausts them to stare at themselves all day or be stared at by others. Enforcing the opening of cameras can be a kind of benevolent surveillance, and people should be able to opt-in or out. All of these things are easy to do and go a long way to avoiding exhaustion from long hours of video conferencing.

More than avoiding exhaustion, though, I believe that we can make video conferencing spaces welcoming spaces, ones that welcome diverse people with different needs and interests, and my colleagues and I call this Intentionally Equitable Hospitality (IEH) (Bali et al. 2019, Bali and Zamora forthcoming).

Intentionally Equitable Hospitality: Pre-design, Design, Facilitation and Beyond

Although we use technology to enact a lot of what we do during a video conference, all of the suggestions I bring here center the human and the connection between humans that video conferencing affords. It is really not about the technology at all, but about a kind of "entangled pedagogy" (Fawns 2021; Fawns 2022) where we are simultaneously hyper-aware of the affordances and limitations of technology and also deeply in touch with our pedagogy and our intentions. We use both of these skillsets to create learning experiences in specific contexts that allow us to do things we could not have done without marrying these two together. It is also essential as we meet people through screens not to ignore the embodied person behind the screen or the entire room surrounding them, for the environment and body are present and affect that person's engagement and presence, whether or not we can see or hear them. And it is also essential to recognize the interplay between power outside of and inside the video conferencing space and recognize our roles as facilitators to subvert inequity in spaces that we lead online.

IEH is "a facilitation praxis" (Bali & Zamora 2022), initially developed in the context of hybrid video conferencing by the co-directors of a grassroots movement called Virtually Connecting (Bali et al. 2019). Virtually Connecting (VC) has "challenged academic gatekeeping via rendering private hallway conversations that build social capital at face-to-face conferences into public hybrid conversations in which people who cannot attend conferences are able to participate" (Bali et al. 2019, para. 7). However, the key underpinning values can be applied to more formal educational contexts (Bali and Zamora, forthcoming).

The key foundation of IEH is that "the teacher or workshop facilitator is a 'host' of a space, responsible for hospitality, and welcoming others into that space" (Bali and Zamora, forthcoming). By "host" here, we evoke the analog meaning of the term: the person who invites others to a space, like a dinner party (not the "host" of a Zoom call, necessarily). The "host" is then responsible for intentionally making moves that promote and ensure equity every step of the way, and especially in these four phases (paraphrased from Bali and Zamora, forthcoming):

1. Pre-design: who is involved in designing the experience? Are the most marginalized groups of participants included, involved, and can they have power to adapt the design in different ways? Which platforms do we use and in what ways do they enable better economic access for people with different infrastructures and devices? In what ways do we account for differences in participants' cultures and how it might affect their participation? What kind of freedoms do we afford participants in the video conferencing platforms (e.g., freedom to use chat, share screen, rename themselves, choose breakout rooms if we use them)?

2. Design: in what ways can our designs enhance engagement in diverse ways that enable everyone's voice to be heard? What kind of guidelines or community practices can the host promote or build with participants to enhance equity? In what ways might the host use "generous authority" (Parker 2019) to ensure no one dominates at the expense of others, for example by suggesting and enforcing equal time at certain stages?
3. Facilitation: in the moment of facilitation, in what ways can hosts be fully present and use "intentional adaptation" (brown 2017) to modify plans in order to better respond to participants' needs, and in order to address unanticipated inequalities that emerge during a live session?
4. Beyond the moment: in what ways can we build community equitably before and after a session to help create a welcoming space for diverse participants? How do we use asynchronous spaces and semisynchronous, less formal spaces (like WhatsApp, Twitter, or Slack) to strengthen the relationships between participants and help enhance cohesion during live video conferencing sessions?

Less Prep, More Presence: Intentional Adaptation

I want to emphasize the importance of "less prep, more presence" (brown 2017), as a central praxis within IEH. I will give some examples of activities that are really great when you plan them, but need some quick thinking during a session to modify for the audience. One example is an activity called Wild/Mad Tea (watch a demo of the Liberating Structure in Development by Bali et al., undated). This is a speed-networking warm-up activity, where people answer questions quickly in pairs and then move on to answering another question in another pair, and so on. In a situation where people face connectivity issues, something that was planned for a pair to take two minutes may be quickly modified for a trio in four minutes, which gives people more time to move to rooms, and is less likely to result in one person ending up alone in a breakout room. An activity that is planned to ask participants to do something on video where people are unable or reluctant to open cameras can be modified to ask participants to share screens and share an image rather than their own faces. And so on. One can initially plan for an open dialogue where people unmute and speak, but in the moment, one can modify the activity and ask all participants to respond in the chat, making room for an initial response from all voices, before asking people to unmute and speak. When we find an audience that is quieter than we anticipate, we can convert a full-group activity into a small-group activity, and ask participants to work in groups of three or four before sharing back to the main group, or create a slide deck for them to edit while in their breakout rooms to give them something concrete to share back.

These are all moves that take a minute or two to set up, but can make a huge difference in shifting the energy and dynamic of a group. Having all these options in our arsenal to draw upon when we need them is what makes for a good facilitator who is more "present," rather than simply "prepared."

Harnessing the Power of the Platform for Equity

On video conferencing platforms there is a phenomenon we do not experience in our daily lives: when we join, we see other people's video, but we also see ourselves on video; "you are forced to see yourself being seen" (Caines 2020, para 5), which "routinizes a kind of self-surveillance" (Caines 2020, para 6). This can cause anxiety for some people, or distract them as they keep checking their own image. At the very least, individuals should be able to control whether they have their cameras on or off, and when. And yet, hosts need to be aware of the ways in which they might naturally focus more on the people with cameras on when others have their cameras off, taking visual cues from them on pacing and so on. Hosts also need to be aware that someone having their camera on is not really a proxy for engagement, as they can be looking at something else on their device or even behind their screen: a laugh or a frown can be related to the sound of a child screaming nearby, or an email they just saw.

By design, video conferencing platforms tend to give the "host" particular privileges (see also Distelmeyer, this volume) such as controlling who speaks and who is muted, who can chat with whom, who can come in and leave, whose video is "spotlighted" for others to focus on, who is allowed to share their screen or not. For a more democratic video conferencing experience, a host can enable others to do whatever they want here—opening up choices to chat, share screen, etc., but paradoxically, sometimes in order to protect participants, a host may limit some of these actions. For example, to avoid random "Zoom-bombing," hosts often disable screensharing and annotating for participants as a default. Occasionally, a host needs to "mute all" participants in order to avoid noise/feedback coming from an unknown source.

One of the biggest forms of control a host has is with breakout rooms on Zoom: a participant can find themselves in a small group conversation with others selected by the host (or randomly) for a certain amount of time, and they have little control over how long they stay or who they are with, and then suddenly the host can yank them back into the main room before they are ready to return. This makes managing time in classes and workshops much easier than in person, where you often cannot stop people from chatting in smaller groups. A host can flip their control here with breakout rooms, by giving participants control over which rooms to join and when to come back to the main room—but they would need to be willing to let go of a lot of control, and in many contexts, this is not the case.

Promoting equity in these spaces involves an awareness of the power the platform affords, and finding ways to promote participants' agency over how they use it, wherever possible. Sometimes a platform will directly allow participants to move themselves to breakout rooms, for example, or rename themselves, or blur their video background; other platforms will require the host to find ways around that, such as asking participants where they want to go before moving them, or inviting people to turn their cameras off if they choose.

Video Conferencing Is About More Than Video

This should be obvious, especially given the kinds of examples I've shared so far, but it bears repeating. Being together on video conferencing does not mean that all we do is share video of ourselves and "conference" (speak). The chat feature of video conferencing enables so much public backchanneling that can enable connection and create space for EVERYONE to participate in ways that are nearly impossible in a face-to-face environment! The opportunities for breakout rooms (especially well done by Zoom) enables intimate small group conversations that many of us miss dearly in the larger conversations that overload our cognition. The capacity to share a screen and annotate collaboratively—to color, to draw, to point out and highlight things while reading or viewing together—provides an experience more complex than paper and pen activities in a classroom context.

And we are never ever limited by a video conferencing platform once we are online, because we do not always need to be talking together in real time, all the time: sometimes we want to write quietly together, create visuals in parallel, or give our opinions anonymously. Sometimes we want to collaborate over a long period of time at our own convenience. We can open Google slides or Google docs or a Miro or Mural board and start editing and creating together (see also Michell, this volume, and Kaldrack et al., this volume). We can use polling tools to hear from everyone, create word clouds of our thoughts, and give everyone an opportunity to share—we bend time and space when we use asynchronous and semisynchronous tools during synchronous sessions.

Conclusion

Creating equitable video conferencing spaces starts with setting our intention and iterating toward equity in the pre-design and design of our sessions, as well as adapting intentionally during sessions. A successful and equitable video conferencing experience can also be enhanced by the communication between participants outside of the time and space of the session itself. Awareness of the ways in which

platforms themselves can reproduce or exacerbate inequalities is essential, as well as awareness of how power inside of the video conferencing space is negotiated, and the ways in which our pedagogy can influence power dynamics.

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