Reflections on the Use of Webinar Technology for Teaching

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Abstract Webinars are used for performing seminars over the World Wide Web. The use of such technology could allow educators to teach students that are in various different geographical locations. The following paper is a personal reflection on the use of webinar software for teaching a small group of graduate level students. During the process of teaching a number of issues were discovered. However, once the issues were resolved it was found that the webinar software had great potential as a teaching tool.
Keywords: distance learning, teaching, webinar

Introduction

Webinars are seminars that are performed on the World Wide Web. They can be meetings, conferences, demonstrations, training or teaching, or events that are designed to give information either one-way or interactively. Webinars can include video, audio and textual communication. Once the user has installed the software they will be invited to join a meeting at an allotted time. The participant users also need a pair of headphones and a microphone. Once joined, the participant will find themselves in a virtual classroom or meeting room. One member of the group will host the meeting while other members can raise points or ask questions through the hand raising function. Webinars can also be recorded and referenced at a later time. This function is useful for reviewing a session or for those that were unable to attend. Webinar sessions can enable students to engage with one another and collaborate and express their opinions and ideas (American Institute of Higher Education, n.d; Webex, 2015). The following paper is a reflection on the use of webinar as a teaching tool. To join webinar the participant must download and install the appropriate software. A number of webinar tools exist, however in the case of this study software supplied by Cisco was used.

Reflections and Discussion on the Use of Webinar for Teaching Purposes

I had previously used Skype and Facetime for teaching on-line but the use of such software is markedly different from face to face teaching. In these situations, I would use a miniature whiteboard to help convey meaning to the student. This option helped to avoid long explanations and misunderstandings. The students would also have additional material that was e-mailed before each lesson. In my opinion the use of such technology to teach on-line was very much second best when compared to a classroom environment. I therefore had some apprehensions and pre-formed conclusions when I began teaching through webinar.

The first part of the process was to install the software. The process was straightforward and simple. The software is available in both a desktop and mobile version. Due to the unreliability of the internet at both my place of work and home I opted to install both versions.

This would enable me to use the software through a smartphone and a mobile data plan in the event of a lack of internet connection.

In the classroom, I usually present slide presentations on an overhead projector screen. This provides a large surface area that can be easily seen by all of the students. As the class members would probably be viewing the presentation on small screens it was important to consider text size and spacing. A simple sans serif such as Lucinda Sans and Arial were chosen for the fonts. The text was enlarged as much as possible. In some cases the text size could have been further increased to aid readability but this would have resulted in a loss of uniformity throughout the presentation. The text colour chosen was a very dark grey. This was displayed on a light grey background. The colours were decided upon for their readability and because they are not too straining on the eyes (Lane, n.d). The use of video and animation was avoided due to low bandwidths among several group members. Presentations were kept relatively simple as fade-ins or jump-ins could appear jerky during presentations.

When presenting, the presenter cannot see the group members. In many ways the presenter is working blind and does not know how the presentation looks to other group members (Bright Talk, 2018). The class were invisible and it was therefore difficult to gauge whether the group were understanding or even enjoying the presentation. In a physical classroom it is easy to gauge students' reactions to the teaching. The instructor can see interested, confused or bored looking faces in front of them. With webinars it is much more difficult to assess the group's interests and experience so as to pitch the presentation at the right level in terms of relevance and interest. The presenter is also more restricted in that the presentation has been made beforehand and therefore cannot be changed to suit the learners' needs.

Discussion questions had been placed through-out the presentations. These were useful pauses in which to also answer general questions and clarify any points. Breaking the presentation in to smaller parts also allowed the group members more opportunities to participate in the presentation. There are possibilities for interactive activities when using webcasting technology for teaching. These though would generally work better for smaller groups. Activities that work on a one to one basis would involve a lot of waiting time while each student took their turn in the activity. Questions or discussion questions generally work better. For larger groups activities would have to be designed that allowed to presenter to give an objective answer or general feedback (Marjanovic, 1999).

The webinar presentations were time consuming to prepare and put together due to the restrictions placed on the instructor. Creating a webinar requires more than just producing a lecture with a few slides. The teacher requires more preparation time for this type of lecture. Regular teaching through webinars would also allow the teacher to recycle their presentations in future classes (Beard, 2016). In a classroom-environment a good speaker could use a few handouts and a whiteboard to get their message across. These options are not available to the webinar presenter. The instructor needs to be a competent user of presentation software and be confident in the use of webcasting technology. Although useful, these skills may not be needed in the traditional classroom environment.

In certain situations webinars can be a useful tool and it can make it possible to teach and present when the participants are in various locations. This scenario can allow various experts to

hold lectures in their home environment thus avoiding all the problems and costs related to travelling. In other situations, students could follow their courses from anywhere provided they have access to a computer with an internet connection. This may allow students in remote areas to gain access to lectures by world experts (Mohorovii, Lasi-Lazi, & Stri, 2011). This webinar revolution though relies heavily on a good internet connection. The reliance on a shared Wi-Fi connection or slow broadband connection may make the process difficult and frustrating. I personally, twice lost connection during the presentations, once momentarily and on another occasion at the end of the presentation. Both instances were barely noticeable but the presenter is placed at the mercy of technology. When the technology does not work there are no other options. The instructor cannot revert to a lecture and whiteboard.

Webinar sessions require all the participants to be on-line at an agreed time. This set up is no different to a normal classroom set up. The difference in the use of webinars is that they are being used to teach or present to participants at various locations. This factor introduces the issue of time differences between locations. For the participants, time differences and availability issues resulted in the sessions starting at 8:30 p.m. This resulted in several of the sessions finishing after 10:00 p.m. The time differences could result in the students' feeling tired and therefore lower participation in the actual lesson (Ahrens, Zaščerinska, Melnikova, Ramar, Clipa, & Andreeva, 2015).

E-learning is becoming an ever increasingly popular channel for the delivery of educational content. The advantages of learning that is detached from a single geographical location may bring added value to the educational process. Technology and e-learning formats are being widely adopted in higher education. Asynchronous learning is useful as it provides participants with the flexibility they need to manage learning time. This may be an important consideration at postgraduate level where students may have work and job commitments. It is difficult though to replace or to imitate face-to-face interaction with asynchronous communication media. The use of webinar allows the lecturer to communicate with their students at an arranged time slot. These sessions can be used to convey information, give feedback to the students and present a lecture. This allows immediate interactivity that is lacking from asynchronous learning. The use of webinar brings the e-learning environment a step closer to the traditional classroom setting (Chen, Ko, Kinshuk, & Lin, 2005).

The main benefits of using webinars in education are many and appear to outweigh the disadvantages. The student has the possibility of watching a pre-recorded webinar or the chance to review a webinar session for a second time. This is useful if the student did not fully understand the content. There may also be cost and time savings through using webinars. Webinars can reach a large audience without the need of a classroom or travel costs. In relation to this point, teaching can be done from distant locations. The webinar software is generally simple to use for both teachers and students. For small group sessions at least, webinars offer interactivity. The use of webinars for teaching is not trouble free. The presenter may need to devise methods for keeping and gaining students' attention. There are various technical issues attached to the use of webinars. Although relatively simple to use, webinars do still need a level of computer literacy. It is difficult to judge the mood of the group. For large groups there may be a lack of interaction between the instructor and the students.

Conclusion

      Overall, I found the webinar software to be a convenient and flexible tool. The tool is particularly useful for teaching students that are present at various locations. The webinar experience was rewarding and useful but the experience also caused anxiety at times due to the possibility of technical issues. The use of such tools may not suit every teacher. Webinars could have applications in not only e-learning courses but as part of a blended learning course where full participation is difficult. Webinars though are not a direct replacement for the traditional classroom environment. The technology may have limitations for certain situations and subjects. They may prove to be a good addition to an e-learning course or a blended environment. Webinars as synchronous communication tool enables instant feedback and introduces a social aspect to on-line courses. This may help social cohesion within a group of learners. Teaching through webinar relies totally on the technology for it to be successful. This may slow its adoption as an alternative to the traditional classroom environment.

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