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To Stream or Not To Stream? The Question Every Online Instructor Wonders About

Max J. Lee, *North Park Theological Seminary*

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As an online instructor who understands the rigors of course design and management, I often wonder if it would be easier to livestream a class through video conferencing, rather than prepare an asynchronous course module by module. In a Hamlet-esque way, I ask: “whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the outrage of course design, or to storm through a sea of troubles by streaming?” In this post, I talk about the perils and advantages of video conferencing a class each week. First, the challenges and in conclusion, the draw.

One, I’m terrible at multi-tasking and with video conferencing, the instructor has to teach the course content and manage the live stream. On my debut day of teaching a live-streamed course for 25 seminarians, several could not log in. Some had audio, but no video. Others had video, but no audio. I spent the first 30 minutes of class trying to get everyone functional. I called IT for help. It was rough.

My recommendation is to meet with students a week before class starts to work out technical problems. Help students log in correctly and explain the essentials of video conferencing, such as how to mute the microphone or share their video screen. Make it fun! Prepare ice-breaker questions, ask students to take turns muting and unmuting their microphones, hear everyone’s stories, and share family photos from your desktop. Getting the kinks out of video conferencing

in a pre-class session is far less stressful than managing tech hiccups on the first day.

Two, how do you manage discussion among 25 people or more in a live-stream setting? If your video conferencing platform does not have a 'breakout' feature, then establishing an etiquette for dialogue is crucial. Everyone should have a headset-with-microphone set up to prevent hearing each other's feedback when speaking. The more people in a session, the more likely one will hear static feedback and background noise. Ask students to keep their microphone on mute and only when someone is speaking should one enable the mic.

If your video conferencing session has a 'breakout' feature, use it! When I was teaching at another institution last fall, the school paid for the full features of Zoom, a popular business conferencing platform. Zoom had a nifty feature: with a click of a button, it would divide the class into small groups. Zoom sent the students out of the main session and into their own private video-conferences. The instructor can set the number of groups and for how long they meet. When their breakout session ends, students are sent back into the main class. Then I had each group share briefly what they discussed and we continued our time together.

Finally, with above two challenges alone, even the casual observer can understand that livestreaming a class is hard work. There is no flexibility in the delivery of the course content. Most of the course is delivered during the three hours the class meets each week. If the technology fails, that day's session is lost.

So are there any advantages? A few. With streaming, less work is done on course design. Some instructors might prefer to spend most of their time teaching the class during the term than designing the course module by module before the term begins.

Most important, I do think that video conferencing provides a more immediate relational connection between the instructor and students. It helps me to see the students, talk with them face-to-face, interact with them each week, and watch them enjoy what they learn. I experience the same with an asynchronous class, but the process is slower.

To stream or not to stream? I'm still deciding which is better. For now, it might be a tie.

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