

Webinars

With the increase in bandwidth and speed of computer processing has come a greater ease in connecting people to people over the internet using real time video. This has spawned a huge increase in the use of webinars, defined simply as: 'A seminar conducted over the Internet' (English Oxford Living Dictionaries). As with face to face seminars, the pedagogic model varies from transmission of knowledge by an expert to a passive audience, to full interaction where all present can participate in the debate, the latter where 'transactional distance' (Starr-Glass, 2013) is reduced tending to be the more successful style.

For teacher training, webinars allow a focused and specific topic for professional development (PD) to be explained by more experienced colleagues or well-known figures in the field. Participants gain most by being able to engage them and ask questions, and so the way that questions are handled is a key element in webinar management. However another important feature of PD webinars is the sense of community and connection to other teachers, not only in the chat at the time but sometimes continuing after the event. Where webinars are recorded, the entire experience can become a resource for continued benefit to teachers who missed the live event.

There are however a number of drawbacks, some of which may disappear as hardware and software increase in capacity and availability world wide and others may decrease as the genre matures and there is more awareness of expected behaviour. It is essential to have a connection that is good enough at least for excellent audio - low bandwidth and platforms that require downloading such as Adobe Connect can be a barrier. Presenters or participants using inappropriate microphones can result in poor sound quality which is another issue. The need to capture attention and keep the topic relevant and interesting is not always understood by some experts who can hold the floor for too long. Busy teachers tend to lose patience too if there is too much off topic chat and small talk, although sometimes this is part of the 'community building' process. A balance has to be struck between the professional and social benefits of this useful medium.

Some relevant references

Starr-Glass, D. 2013. 'From connectivity to connected learners: transactional distance and social presence' in C. Wankel and P. Blessinger, (eds.) *Increasing Student Engagement and Learning in E-learning Environments: Web 2.0 and Blended Learning Technologies*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing

Wang, S-K. and H-Y. Hsu. 2008. 'Use of the webinar tool (Elluminate) to support training: the effect of webinar-learning implementation from student-trainers' perspective.' *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 7/3 175 - 194