

Using a simple, free Voice-over-Internet Protocol service to add interest to lectures and enhance student engagement

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A large proportion of students in higher education report feeling bored during lectures, for example, Mann and Robinson (2009) put this figure at 60 per cent. This short article reviews our experiences of using a simple, free Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) service, Skype, to enhance the interest and engagement of students by holding a synchronous, online discussion with a remotely-located expert in a field of great interest to those students. While a formal evaluation has not been conducted, technology and process options are described and indications that the students found the combination engaging are included. A formal evaluation in the future could reveal whether these observations are replicated.

THE WIDELY USED, teacher-led, presentation approach to lectures in higher education has a venerable history, but despite the merits of cost effectiveness and clarity, it comes at a cost. According to Mann and Robinson (2009), approximately 60 per cent of students in higher education report feeling bored during lectures. Students on the receiving end of a lecture, no matter how clear or well-structured the presentation, can become less motivated, more passive and take less responsibility for their own learning (Short & Martin, 2011). The latter study found that students both preferred and had better memory for information presented using the performance approach where the aim is to inspire the student to learn. In contrast to the presentation approach, the performance approach includes activities designed to better engage students through:

- Greater visual impact;
- An informal presentation style;
- More audience interaction;
- Personal links and anecdotes;
- Humour;
- Controversial examples.

Making activities more interesting and enjoyable is an obvious way of increasing engagement, even for something as mundane as walking up or down stairs ('Piano stairs – TheFunTheory,' 2009).

Clinical Psychology at the University of Worcester, UK, is a year three/level six optional module in the BSc Psychology degree. Seventy students enrolled in the module in the first semester of 2012 and face-to-face (f2f) classes were held on Monday evenings between 18.15 and 21.15. The time of this class is relevant both because of its lateness in the day and because some students had other long classes earlier in the day. It was, by a long way, the least popular aspect of the module when students were polled in the mid-semester review. This presents a challenge to those attending the class as many students are already tired when the class begins and find it difficult to maintain concentration. Taking a presentation approach to this class might be useful in helping students to catch up on their sleep, but it is not ideal for those wanting to learn clinical psychology.

The second author was the module leader and wanted to make the module more interesting and engaging for students for all the above practical and pedagogical reasons. A class within the Clinical Psychology module was chosen to informally trial a combination of distance learning with the performance approach; specifically to use inexpensive VoIP technology to bring an international expert, who combines knowl-

edge with passion for her subject, into the classroom.

It became clear early in the module, that students were struck by, and often asked questions about, the elevated risk of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and suicide associated with many of the mental disorders that were discussed during the module. The authors had discussed this topic and also observed that many mental health practitioners seem unprepared to deal with clients/service users who experience NSSI, suicidal ideation or suicidal behaviour. We felt that this class could benefit from the first author's expertise in suicide prevention, the challenge to be overcome merely a few thousand kilometres.

The first author is a psychologist with over 25 years' experience of working in the suicide prevention field in Australia and the US. This experience stretches across prevention, intervention and postvention including: helplines, crisis centres, university setting, school setting, NGOs, training, education, Board of Directors' membership, as well as strategic advice to State and Commonwealth governments. She is now a suicide prevention specialist consultant located in Australia.

The second author has useful and relevant experience of holding classes, seminars and tutorials across time zones, having worked for several years at the University of the South Pacific (USP). That university is owned by 12 Pacific island nations with campuses in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu, and with university broadcasting studios in all 12 member countries. Classes may be f2f or held over the dedicated satellite network, USNet. This allows for multi-national discussions, which may be audio-only or with video added. The opportunity for students from many cultures and countries to interact synchronously with their lecturers and with other students was usually enriching for all involved, as well as necessary, given the vast distances between the university's member nations.

Technology used

To get the greatest visual impact and audience interaction it was felt that the class should use synchronous audio and video, giving the opportunity for questions and discussion. Several options were considered: dedicated video conferencing usually provides a good quality connection, but costs more and takes longer to set up; the video chat capabilities built into web browsers such as Firefox, Chrome and Internet Explorer are inexpensive but more prone to 'glitches' and breaks in connection. The chosen option, which provided an acceptable compromise between reliability, cost and ease of use, was to use the free software 'Skype'. This was installed on a laptop with built-in camera and wi-fi connection to the internet at the Australian end, and the same software installed on the desktop machine in the university lecture theatre, connected to the university's network and thence to the internet. A webcam was connected to the university computer via USB. The sound and image were projected to the lecture theatre and the camera's built-in microphone was able to pick up sound from the first few rows of the theatre. Anyone speaking beyond that range required the lecturer to relay the questions or discussion points.

It is worth noting that, at some universities, academic staff are not permitted to install software on any university computer; this role only being performed by the IT department. The barriers and delays created by such a system usually make it difficult, if not impossible, to set up connections and classes such as this.

At the time of this class there was an 11-hour time difference between the University of Worcester and Canberra in south-east Australia with the connection established at 20.00 hours in Worcester and 07.00 hours in Canberra.

The process of the session

The authors planned the class together deciding on a conversational style with question and answer format to begin; so

three introductory questions were formulated (see below). This modelling was designed to encourage the student's own questions and discussions which would take up most of the session. Appropriate and relevant articles and resources were posted for students to access online via the class 'Blackboard' page. Further suicide prevention training options were also investigated and posted for those students wishing to further their knowledge and skills on this topic.

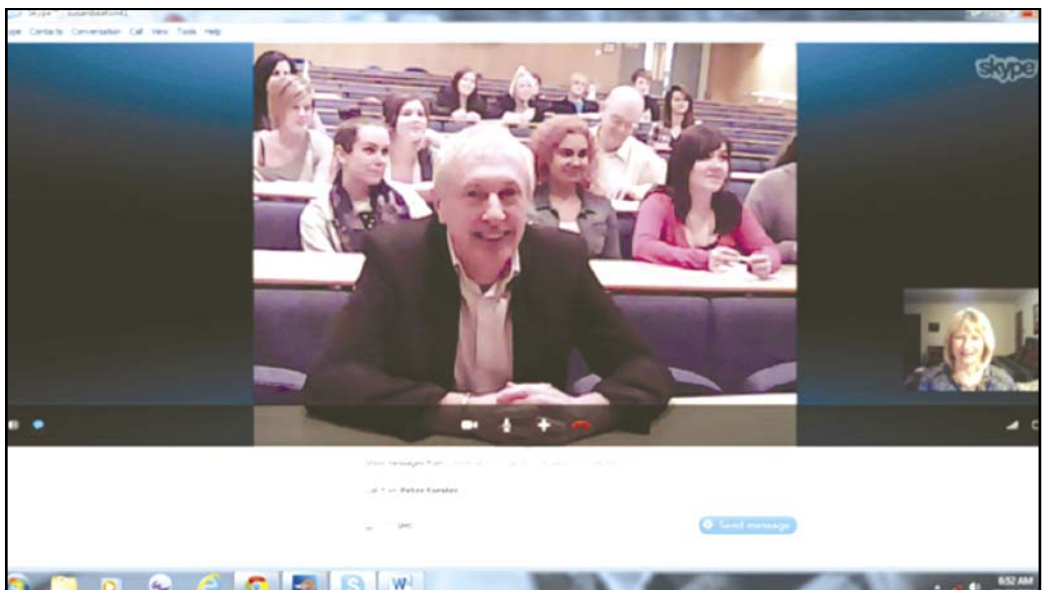
One week before the class, a post was added to the Blackboard page for the module saying when and where the live connection would be made, giving some information about the topic and about Susan, and inviting people to come to the class with any questions they might have as most of the class would be interactive. Suicide is a challenging topic and we believe that many students would relish the opportunity to ask whatever they wanted of an international expert.

Before establishing the live connection, students were reminded about the format of the session and the range of the microphone. The live connection was then established without hitches. After greetings we launched into three questions that we thought useful in their own right and which also gave students time to adjust to the process and to the speaker, her perspective and her accent:

1. Is suicide preventable and, if so, how?
2. 'Suicide is not just about mental illness' Can you say a bit more about this please?
3. Where does deliberate self-harm, Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) fit into this picture?

The session was then opened to questions and discussions from the whole class. Questions were on such topics as the signs that someone may be suicidal, suicide contagion, helping people who are suicidal and how to help those engaging in NSSI. A particularly

Figure 1: How the session appeared in Canberra, Australia.



memorable moment came when Susan invited those who felt able to share, to raise their hand if their life had been touched in some way by the suicide of someone close to them. A little over half the people in the class raised a hand – a profound reminder of how many lives have been affected by suicide.

Student response

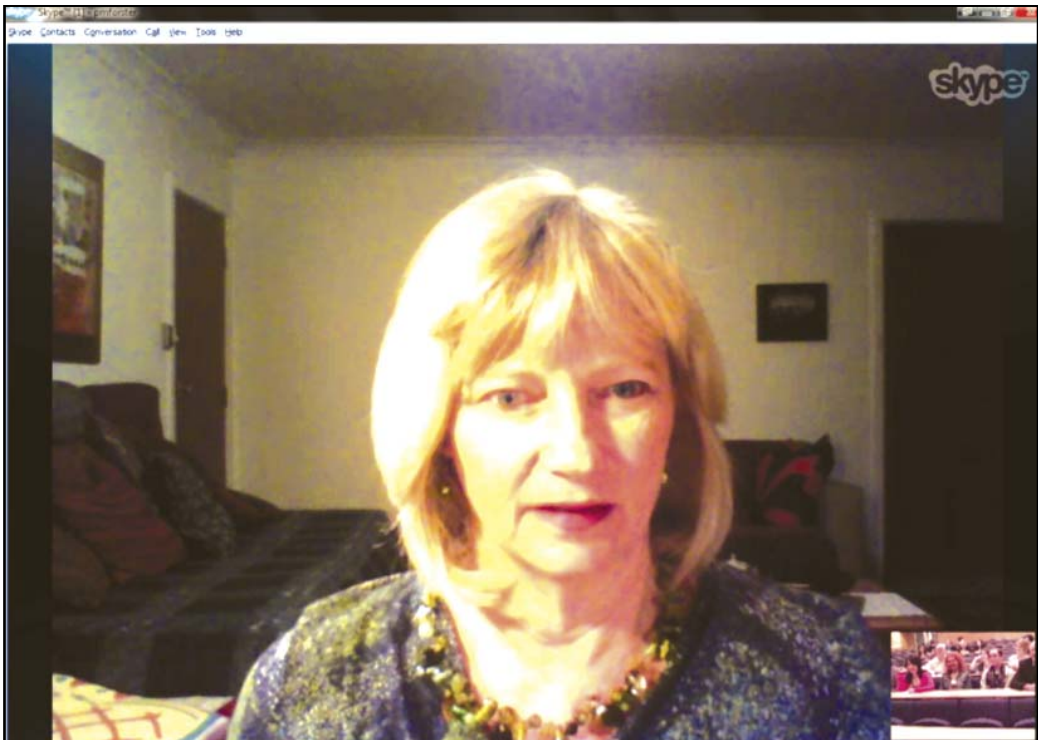
Although a formal evaluation was not conducted, tutor observations are included below. One student commented, ‘I thought the session with Susan was a good idea, was resourceful as she has a wide knowledge on the subject area, was very interesting learning and I learnt a lot. Only negative was the connection wasn’t always solid and sometimes the point being made came through a bit unclear. But I think using guest speakers is good – gives a different way of learning.’ The lecturer observed students departing the session with a ‘buzz’ of conversation,

apparently energised by the interactive session to a greater extent than after less interactive sessions. Another indicator that this session was positively received by the students came from another lecturer of level six students who volunteered the information that her students had been talking to her about the session and said that they enjoyed it and found it interesting. Two weeks later, at the BSc Course Committee meeting, the year three student representative cited this session as an example of good practice and a commendation was entered in the minutes of the meeting.

Benefits and issues

From our perspective, this was a worthwhile session to organise. It was an opportunity for undergraduates to discuss an important topic with an expert in the field. Informal conversations with the students suggested that they found it engaging both to have a

Figure 2: How the session appeared in Worcester, UK.



discussion with a leader in the field and to have that discussion with someone located outside the university; making the link between the UK and Australia seems to have added to the interest. This session continued as an occasional topic of class discussion through the rest of the module.

The simple technology used made it possible to organise and run the session at short notice. The necessary software and hardware can be added to almost any internet-connected computer and be set up within about 15 to 20 minutes. Although the use of Skype could potentially have been seen as 'gimmicky', it appears not to have been taken as such.

Regarding things that could be improved, having microphones that could pick up people speaking anywhere in the lecture theatre would have helped the flow of discussions and would help some of those in the remote regions of the room participate more easily.

Although the connection was of acceptable quality there were a couple of brief periods when both audio and video deteriorated in quality. In our experience of using such a setup to make a connection between the UK and Australia, this was one of the better quality connections. We have sometimes lost the connection completely, so for anyone thinking of trying this, it would be as well to have other activities in mind in case of such an eventuality, or to invest extra time and money in a more secure option such as a professional video conference service. For some, the possible loss of spontaneity and the ability to quickly take up an opportunity may be worth it.

Final thoughts

We have satisfied ourselves that, with some simple and inexpensive VoIP technology, we can open up our lectures to interesting outside speakers and have a more engaging and memorable process. We actually found it fun to take part in.

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