

Conferring on Conferencing Accessibility: Guidance for Ensuring Access to Online Lectures

Justin Romack, Assistive Technology Coordinator, Department of Disability Resources, Texas A&M University

Allen H. Sheffield, Director, Office of Disability Services, Rutgers University-Newark

Melanie Thornton, Coordinator of Access and Equity Outreach, University of Arkansas, Partners for Inclusive Communities

Many instructors find the easiest transition from teaching face-to-face is simply using video conferencing technology and moving their face-to-face lecture online. While this closely approximates the in-classroom experience and provides familiarity with the transition to a remote environment, it brings added barriers to students.

Disability resource professionals are being looked to by faculty, staff, and/or university leadership for guidance on picking accessible video conferencing platforms or making existing platforms accessible. It can be challenging to navigate the seemingly endless video conferencing platforms that exist. This is a brief guide to highlight points to consider as you move forward.

Video Conferencing Platform Accessibility

If you have been tasked with recommending a video conferencing tool for the university or need to use one to address a specific access need, start by examining your university's supported video conferencing platforms(s) and connecting with the information technology and/or instructional design team. If your university has already adopted a video conferencing solution that is accessible, you are ahead of the game. If not, the following questions can help you narrow down your options as you explore a solution that fits your needs.

- What video conferencing platforms are being used by organizations that value (and would have already tested for) accessibility? Are these platforms available to you to use at your university? (For example, AHEAD uses Adobe Connect, the ADA National Network uses Blackboard Ultra, and the International Association of Accessibility Professionals uses Zoom.)
- Does the website for the platform you are considering have information about accessibility and compatibility with assistive technology?
- Does the platform offer:
 - Accessible navigation and keyboard shortcuts?
 - Built in caption support?
 - Multiple ways to participate, such as dial-in by phone and connecting by computer?

- Are the accessibility features built into the main platform? If not, does it require a change in the settings or a separate software version?

If a platform is being used by your university or faculty for the first time, it will need to be tested for accessibility.

Platform Navigation

Video conferencing platforms have unique interfaces and navigation tools. Most platforms have controls for a variety of functions—muting and unmuting, video on or off, navigating to the chat window, answering “yes” or “no” to questions, raising a hand, etc. In order for these tools to be accessible, they have to be navigable by keyboard alone. They also have to be labeled properly so that a screen reader user can identify each item and be able to control it. Many platforms are totally inaccessible. They require someone to use a mouse to operate the functions, and do not label the buttons properly so that a screen reader user can track where they are within the application.

Even with platforms that are accessible, and in which keyboard shortcuts are provided, memorizing all of the keyboard commands for these functions can be overwhelming. Consider also that sometimes students may be using more than one video conferencing platform for different courses, and the navigation keys are different with each.

Lecture Materials

Instructors often share their screen or share slides during their presentation. Not all students have the ability or technology to see the content being displayed. Instructors should verbalize descriptions for all visual content, including spoken descriptions of images, handwritten text, white board content, and techniques being demonstrated. Instructors should also share an accessible version of their materials before class for students to review and access. This provides access to those who dial-in rather than joining by computer.

Communication Access

If you have students who were using sign language interpreters or real-time captioning in the classroom, they will also need those services when participating remotely. Ideally, they could use the same provider since that person/team will be familiar with the course content. However, some access service providers may not have the ability to move to an online environment, which would require changing to a different provider. There are many companies that provide remote captioning and interpreting services, and some are even providing discounts during this emergent situation. The service provider will need the login information for the class session in order to provide services. Also, providers should be added to the course learning management system (or be sent handouts and presentation materials) so they can use the course materials to prepare for the course meetings.

Preparing in advance is an essential component of ensuring access. It is always advisable to run a test beforehand if at all possible. Most access service providers are glad to assist with this.

Captioning

The more accessible video conferencing applications have a built in method for providing captioning. The captioning provider is able to login and is given access to the captioning module to provide captioning. Some video conferencing vendors have existing agreements with communication access providers. They give you the option to use their specific captioning vendor for an extra fee. You can opt to use your own provider, however.

If there is not a built in component, the provider and student will need to have a separate browser window for providing the captioning. Many of the remote captioning vendors have their own system and can walk you through the process.

Some video conferencing systems also offer automatic transcription. This is not considered equivalent access due to inaccuracies and lack of punctuation.

Sign Language Interpreting

Viewing a sign language interpreter through video conferencing technology requires a more stable Internet connection and higher bandwidth than simply watching a lecture online. Any freezing or interruptions in the video feed can result in the student totally losing track of the lecture. Most video conferencing technology does allow for more than one video to stream (i.e. the professor and the interpreter) but they vary in terms of the options available to control the size of each video. Some students find that it is easier to have the course open in one window and the interpreter beside it in the other. This configuration requires even more bandwidth and may further strain technology and Internet capacity. Some students may not have the high-speed Internet required to be able to carry the simultaneous video feeds of the lecturer and the interpreter and may thus require a different solution.

Planning for Access

Most instructors who are making these transitions had not intended to teach an online course, just as the students had not intended to take an online course. External considerations that were not a factor in the classroom now come into play, such as, Internet access or capacity, limited or aging technology, or a home environment not conducive to online learning.

For many students, balancing the use of assistive technologies, communication access, or other accommodative strategies can pose high demand on cognitive load. This, combined with many of the interactive features of the conferencing platforms used to deliver synchronous courses, may cause students to feel overwhelmed as they work to participate and engage during online lectures. Providing guidance and working with instructors to build in support and flexibility will go a long way to providing access.

Guides for Accessible Platform Use

Provide resources and/or a guide for users on how to activate and use the accessible features of the platforms your university is using. Before investing the time to develop

your own, look online and connect with colleagues to see what already exists. If the university has existing support for the platform, integrate this information to create a single point of reference.

Course Design

Regardless of the platform being used, the design of the course and how the platform is incorporated play a large role in determining the accessibility of the course. Disability resource professionals can support faculty as they consider course design and integrating video conferencing successfully. Encourage instructors to be flexible whenever possible. This will allow students to engage as best they are able regardless of their circumstances. Activating recordings of the course allows a student access to instruction if a situation arises to prevent real-time access and to review at their own pace.

It is important for instructors to communicate how they intend to spend time during their lecture, including expectations on how they will use interactive features, like chat and polls, and give time for students to navigate to these features when directed.

If the course allows two-way communication, students may not have the ability to make use of some or any of the options. A good plan is to build in multiple options to engage during course instruction. For example, allowing students to either submit their questions by chat, email or using voice would be less likely to create barriers than allowing only one option.