WHAT I LEARNED OVER SUMMER VACATION ON BEING TECH SUPPORT FOR CLASSES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

By Dee Becker, September 2020

Body language is missing. You sit too much and too long. You have to hold your head funny to see the screen. It feels like the introduction to the Muppet Show or Brady Bunch. Conversations can be awkward with lags and garbled sound. But it’s a point of connection outside your pandemic pod family and friends.

And that’s if you can get online in the first place.

Since this pandemic started, my family has had multiple potential exposure vectors for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid 19). No one here, thankfully, has been confirmed as having caught it. But erring on the side of caution, we have dutifully rearranged the house and settled in for a while. With all the commutes, extracurriculars, and destinations cancelled, there has been plenty of time to explore social media.

I have attended a work conference where the sessions were typically 2,000 to 10,000 people each. That’s thousands of people potentially commenting in the chat at one time! Those sessions had a team working behind the scenes watching the chat, forwarding good questions to the presenters (a dozen out of hundreds might make the cut), troubleshooting audience issues (can’t see or hear the presenter usually), helping the presenter with tech and other issues, and watching the clock.

More often I’m on a Daily Operations Review work call (DOR), taking a class, sitting in on a music session, a club meeting, or a group chat. Each of these have developed different social norms, are hosted on a variety of platforms, and are still exploring how to advertise meeting times effectively. Work calls are easy with a stable company platform and calendar. Anything else has had a larger learning curve getting up and running and drawing in attendees. And that is a subject for a different article.

You’ve made it – you are on the call / in the session / attending the service / put-your-favorite-context-word-here. Now what? That’s also the subject for a different article, but some expectations are outlined at the end of this article.

What’s happening on the tech support side? To sum up: multi tasking.  For tech support setting up an event, preparation is key. Multi-day events with sessions running simultaneously need to consider how people will maneuver from one spot to another. A vivid imagination helps conceptualize the non-physical space. For two simultaneous classes, a ‘social room’ with a moderator can sort people to a break-out ‘room’, but this is cumbersome for larger events. One solution is to have each ‘room’ be its own call ID, with an event web page guide matching up ‘room’ topic, time block, and access ID. This is not the only solution, and groups are exploring options in a landscape of quickly changing platforms. The access and announcement capabilities of Facebook earlier this summer, no longer work weeks later for the next event that tried to repeat what was done earlier.

For tech support on a call, things are a bit simpler. Opening the call. Taking over as host if the presenter needs to step away. Guiding the host to switch views to better see participants, watching the chat, trouble shooting, facilitating communication, and this list is looking familiar. Guiding the attendees on getting recognized, troubleshooting, answering questions, providing information, and this list is also starting to look familiar.

The issues you may experience are exactly what is going on everywhere, even with presenters who have been doing this multiple times.  There is a large learning curve, and still stuff happens. First and foremost: Don’t confuse social media limitations with a personal slight. The attendees have as much or more to learn and get used to as the presenters and hosts. It feels funny. We all feel weird. And moments of panic or annoyance pop up at unexpected times. One time everyone had their video off on a Zoom call, so it confused the presenter when they had a totally different screen with no grid of people, which they were expecting from their familiarity with Google Teams or Meets calls. It took a few minutes for everyone to figure out what was going on and fix that situation.

Protocols While Attending A Social Media Group Event:

These are general observations across multiple types of meeting types and platforms and by no means an exhaustive list.

* Tech Support
  + Keep your comments brief and on point.
  + If also attending as a participant, let the presenter know. Otherwise your comments as an attendee will likely cause panic (you spoke! something went wrong?!) or confusion.
* Presenters, Hosts, and Planners
  + The presenter should be open and leave a longer pause than usual for this due to lag times, which takes a while and some practice to get used to doing
  + Talk slower than you think you should. Digital sound tends to clip out bits if too fast or, especially with music, with sounds outside of ‘normal’ vocal ranges
  + There are settings to tweak for all sorts of reasons. Read the FAQ and ask questions; platforms are not all the same, and frequent updates mess up what you think you know.
  + Regular recurring meetings are easier to go back to. “Regular” in this context may be an extended social group with a common background or interest, or it may be a weekly, biweekly, or monthly event with a stable login time and duration.
  + Don't rush a speaker ..... unless they are muted and don't know it.  Sound distortions, compression and elongation are normal and caused by internet capacity issues that are beyond the speakers' control
  + All participants should be aware of lag times and limited perceptions. The zoom views are not the same as being in a room watching for reactions.
* Attendee – whether you think of it as participant, attendee, student or something else, these are a few things to consider
  + It’s usually OK to ask for help with your own device set up or issues. We are all learning and many control settings are not easy to find.
  + It's usually OK to unmute and chime in with a quick comment. Follow the presenter’s instructions and use the chat instead of talking over others.
  + Context matters:
    - If you have been isolated and want to talk non-stop for 20 minutes, it may be better to be aware of that fact and utilize more calls with your social group more often. The duration of calls is usually limited and others would also like a turn. The chat and private messages are better outlets.
    - Start slowly and learn how to maneuver around this new landscape. It is OK to ask for help.
  + Don't rush a speaker ..... unless they are muted and don't know it.  Sound distortions, compression and elongation are normal and caused by internet capacity issues that are beyond the speakers' control
  + All participants should be aware of lag times and limited perceptions. The screen views are not the same as being in a room watching for reactions. If you have a quick response or think you have been overlooked, make a comment in the chat if it is short (good idea - I have a question - did you see my raised hand?)
* Everyone:
  + Use mute for many reasons
    - Your background is noisy
    - Someone else is presenting
    - Your typing is noisy
    - If there are a lot of people on the call, one person's accidental loud noise can mess up the flow of conversation or presentation
    - This is not an exhaustive list
  + Dropping in or out of a call without an introduction or long goodbyes is the norm, usually. It feels funny at times, but internet connection speeds and capacity vary so widely that no one is surprised or put out after a few times of seeing it happen (or having it happen to them)
  + Forgetting to unmute before speaking – it happens to everyone. Others should kindly speak up, send a message in the chat, or have a printed sign handy if it happens a lot (yes, I’ve seen this on many occasions – a sign is also good if a standard phrase like ‘Yay’ is appropriate to your meetings)
  + There may be a lag after you stop presenting. That is normal and not an indication that your delivery was not liked.
  + Applause has developed into many silent forms: thumbs up, clapping hands, hand waving based on American or other Sign languages, printed signed, and falling off your seat. Your mileage may vary.