

3 MINUTES: FROM ZERO TO HERO

Reimagining poster sessions for the digital domain

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Daniela is a PhD student in the Dowson group at the University of Warwick, where she researches how elements of the immune system interact with bacterial defence proteins. Daniela graduated from the University of Warwick with a first-class honours Bachelor of Science degree in Biochemistry in 2018.

Daniela has greatly enjoyed post-graduate teaching responsibilities; she was awarded AFHEA status in September 2020. Daniela was Lead Demonstrator for the final year Biomedical Science laboratory during October 2020, where she worked with Senior Teaching Fellows to redesign the iconic class to produce a well-received Covid-secure, accessible class for all students.

Abstract

A reflection on the trial of three-minute student showreel video presentations, in place of a virtual rendition of a traditional academic poster session, in an interdisciplinary conference held online during the Covid-19 pandemic. I revisit the motivation for suggesting this pedagogical approach and reflect on the different learning stakeholders which contributed to the learning strategy's success.

Keywords: video presentations, poster sessions, virtual teaching, virtual conference, interdisciplinary, Covid-19

Reimagining poster sessions for the digital domain

I proudly served on the student planning committee for the Medical Research Foundation's (MRF) Third Annual Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) Conference, which occurred in August 2020 via Zoom. The conference is interdisciplinary by nature, combining guests from humanities and the sciences. In those planning sessions, we explored what we could offer our guests, and how we could offer an attractive conference entirely online.

Our discussion turned to a virtual poster session: so... breakout rooms could be opened... and people could join a room, and we could view the posters in advance... and we will all be able to read the size 9 font on an 11-inch iPad... and everyone's equipment will work on the day...

The discussion filled me with palpable dread. The very idea of a virtual poster session sends chills down my spine. The real utility of a poster session, to my mind, is to enable more people to present their work without demanding that every guest must remain shackled to their chair and pay undivided attention to it. My restless legs live for the poster session. My non-stop lightning fast million-thoughts-a-minute brain lives for the chop-and-change vibrancy of the poster session. Guests can pick and choose, and float around until they find a poster, or a person, which catches their interest. After this they can choose to network, strike up a deeper conversation, and develop a connection. This is the essence of the poster session.

Poster sessions are about networking... but how do you successfully network on a Zoom call? Better still – during lunch? The virtual constraints of this conference preclude swanning effortlessly around a poster session, vol-au-vent in hand, politely nodding as an impassioned student waxes lyrical about their research. Nay, I will be rushing around to find a slice of ham, some cheese, and two slices of

bread to fashion into a sandwich, which I will inhale as I strain with a magnifying glass to follow a tiny, pixelated poster detailing the thesis of a final year PhD student with 45 papers to their name.

The horror of the potential clunkiness of a virtual lunch-poster session fusion, the exhausting “your mic isn't on” pantomime, sounded as though it would do everybody's research a grave injustice. The virtual experience would both be accidentally and substantially different from that experience in person. It would be a mirage of a poster session and an irksome distraction from our all-important lunch.

I suggested we could invite guests to submit a short, snappy, three-minute video detailing their research, or perhaps a ‘day in the life’ video. Guests would have free reign to submit practically anything related to their work. Then we could compile the videos into a playlist and play them throughout the breaks and the lunch break. That way guests are afforded the ability to watch the videos at ease, enjoy their lunch undisturbed, and the opportunity for networking still presents itself – even in an enhanced way. The videos would afford guests with hidden creative talents the opportunity to be discovered and could offer fun icebreakers for the networking session.

The idea was met with trepidation, so I went on the hard sell; I believed in the videos as an access-enhancing interdisciplinary pedagogical tool. The inflexible, deeply entrenched, dogmatic pedagogy creaked, groaned, struggled, strained, then finally yielded to the idea.

The planning committee supported the notion of showreel presentations to replace the virtual poster session, and the call for videos went live. After the grand unveiling of the showreel presentations, guests were asked for feedback.

“Really good idea! Much easier than trying to talk to poster presenters while eating lunch.”

“3 minute videos have been great, fantastic insight into your projects and what you’re doing.”

“Could we replay [the videos] tomorrow? It’s been great to see what most people are working on from the 3 minute videos”

The showreel presentations generated a buzz among the guests and infused an energetic zing into the conference, adding more of the ‘social butterfly among the flower-bed, vol-au-vent in hand’ feel I normally associate with conferences.

Poster sessions at in-person conferences offer a familiar level of visual feedback which is effectively shrouded in the privacy of the virtual realm. I imagine the reassurance of seeing engagement and interaction is comforting to event organisers and guests. Virtual teaching is often devoid of these familiar comforts due to a myriad of limits: hardware, software, bandwidth, real-world distraction... Teaching and learning is all about understanding limits of systems, then appropriately extending these boundaries: propelling the cutting edge of the discipline further. Respecting the boundaries of a pedagogical tool’s utility will help teachers avoid the fatal error of misusing pedagogical tools outside their bounds or forcing traditional pedagogical approaches into virtual spaces.

The planning committee gambled on a previously untested and potentially risky pedagogical approach, and it turned out well.

Our success was in understanding the limits of both our virtual platform and our humanity. By including this new pedagogical tool in our virtual teaching and learning experience we were able to evoke the very essence of the in-person poster session. This new approach was well received by our guests, enhanced the guest experience, and added value to the conference.

Emboldened by this experience, I hope to continue developing my teaching style by exploring different interdisciplinary learning activities with my students. Novel teaching and learning environments necessitate novel approaches to teaching and learning. Evidence- and practice- based teaching is important for honing our craft as teachers. I think, where necessary, we should encourage and trust teachers to explore dynamic and interdisciplinary approaches, releasing them (and their students) from the shackles of discipline-specific pedagogy.

Great teaching doesn’t happen in a vacuum: it is a collaborative effort. I am thankful that the MRF organised the conference online: a medium which afforded the opportunity for this creative endeavour. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to serve on the student planning committee: where my voice was heard, and my contributions valued. I am grateful for the courageous support of my confrères, without which the idea would not have come to fruition. I am indebted to the guests who put such time, effort, and dedication into the three-minute videos. I am pleased to report that the three-minute video showreel presentations were a prominent feature in the MRF’s Fourth Annual AMR Conference in August 2021, where they were elevated to having independent timetabled slots.

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