

LOW TECH ENGAGEMENT

TIPS FOR FACILITATING NON-VIDEO CONFERENCE CALLS

This resource contains ways to create meaningful, valuable virtual engagement with those who have limited or unreliable internet access and technological capacity.

LOW TECH PLATFORM OPTIONS

Some options to consider depending on the constraints:

- Telephone conference call.
- Zoom, but with all the participants calling in on the phone ([check here to see if there are local numbers for your participants](#)); this option works if you want to use Zoom breakout rooms, or if some of your participants can do video conference but others need to be on the phone.
- Telephone conference call or Zoom along with low-bandwidth web-based collaboration tools like Google Docs, Google Slides, or Jamboard for collaborative harvesting, [Menti](#) (web access needed) or [Poll Everywhere](#) (has an option for SMS text access).

Regardless of the low tech option you decide on, design still matters. Use the [Simple Online Meeting Planner Tool](#) to support your meeting design process.

TIPS: ROLES

Decide on roles. The meeting chair does not have to be the same person who is looking after the call facilitation duties. Specific roles are more important as the size of the group increases.

- A facilitator or master of ceremonies who supports the meeting process.
- A “greeter” who arrives 5 or more minutes early to welcome people as they arrive on the phone line helps them orient socially.
- A “tech person” who can help people (in the invitation you could provide a number people can text if they are having any difficulties).
- Designated presenters, topic speakers, or facilitators for specific agenda items.
- A note-taker.

TIPS: INVITATION PROCESS

You might need to spend more time on the invitation process, for both the

technology side of things (even with the telephone conference option), as well as preparing participants to be ready to participate and engage in the purpose and content of the meeting. Consider doing some one on one outreach conversations both ahead of the meeting and also afterwards in follow-up with folks.

- At in-person meetings, someone might come up to you on a break and share something really important. Those pre and post phone calls can help catch some of those perspectives that people don't share with the whole group.

Email surveys can be used to share content and then ask a series of questions for people to respond to. [Google Forms](#) is a free, easy to use option, and the responses can be automatically compiled in a Google Spreadsheet. A follow up phone call with people helps to connect and ask deeper questions about what was on the survey.

Some additional ideas to create an engaging invitation process:

- Short audio-only recordings folks could listen to in advance of the meeting; use the voice notes app on your cell phone, or short video recordings.
- WhatsApp could also be used for group chats for a meeting group, and you can also send voice notes to the group from inside WhatsApp.
- A private Facebook group might also provide an interactive space for the participants, and you could do short Facebook Live videos.

Distribute any supporting documents or files well before the call start, and let participants know if they need to have to have any materials open or printed for access during the call. Integrating audio with visuals can help focus more attention and understanding.

Include any links to shared web-based collaboration tools like Google Docs.

TIPS: DURING THE CONFERENCE CALL

Consider being available 30 minutes ahead on the call line and inviting people to arrive early 'for coffee' for informal social and connecting time, as well as staying on after for another 15 or 20 minutes at the end. This can help tend to the relational layer of your work together. Play some background music to help create a hospitable space.

Don't skip the practice of check-in and check-out on the phone; you might use "Just Three Words" as a check-in where you ask each person for three words that describe their intention for the call, and at the end as a check-out with three words that describe their experience on the call.

- Acknowledge up front that on the phone we can't pick up on non-verbal

communication cues like body language to help read the room, so from time to time you'll be inviting people to speak at various times. You might also name the call as an 'apology-free zone'; no need to apologize for your kids, your doggos, your family members, etc!

- Greet and know who is on the call (use "the clock" described below).
- Establish a practice of announcing your name when taking a turn speaking.
- Use guest speakers or multiple speakers to avoid "boredom" with one voice/presenter.

Share leadership duties to help less engaged people become more involved in the call. Ask individuals to lead sections of the agenda, and assign people different roles such as note taker, timekeeper, keeper of unanswered questions, etc.

If you have some people on videoconference and some people on the phone, ensure you are narrating what is happening for those on the phone as they can't see what others are seeing, including reading any messages in the chat. Things like "So far on the call we have Laura and Stephanie on video, and Rowan and yourself on the phone". Or "You can't see this, but everyone is nodding emphatically with what Tiana said". Or "We're opening the Google doc now so we can catch these ideas."

["The Clock"](#) can be used on conference calls to help people get and keep a sense of place and participation in a disembodied conference call. You can ask everyone to draw a circle on a piece of paper and mark the hours like a clock. Then, each person is assigned a spot on the "clock" as they join the group. So the first person is 1 o'clock, the second 2, etc. If there are more than twelve, start adding 1:30, 2:30 etc. Use this initially to create a speaking sequence for intros, and then use it to ensure everyone speaks. Participants can make notations by names and use it as a visual tool to match names/voices/input.

The clock is especially helpful for the facilitation team to track who has contributed/who hasn't (watching for folks who may be dominating or very quiet), to create a speaker order, as well as any other notes. This will help you to invite in any voices you haven't heard from in a while, as well as an order to call on folks to speak for a full round of hearing from everyone for inclusive participation. If you are doing multiple rounds of "speaking" vary the "starting position" on the clock. You could create the clock in a Google Doc that the facilitation team has access to together while on the call. [See here for a sample clock image.](#)

Sometimes it might be appropriate to call on people by name e.g. "Sam we haven't heard your voice in a while; is there anything you'd like to offer in?" Or more generally: "We've been hearing from a few folks, and now we want to hear from those who haven't had a chance to speak yet..."

Consider "break out sessions" where pairs get off the main call, call each other,

interact and call back on to the phone bridge. Pair up participants in advance and share a phone list. Then during the call, assign a pairs task, have the pairs get off the main call and work for 10 minutes and return to the main number at a stated time to report out/debrief the activity.

If you are using Zoom, but with all the participants calling in on the local phone number ([check here to see if there are local numbers for your participants](#)); you can use the Zoom breakout rooms.

For higher-heat topics, use circle facilitation process to help people slow down, speak to the centre instead of flinging arrows at each other, create more attentive listening and intentional speaking without interruptions, and to hear all voices. This can be translated to the phone/virtual environment with a virtual talking piece and 'roll call' to invite people by name to speak one after the other. Frame a question then invite a round. You might need a second round of sharing if anyone's perspective has shifted from listening to our first round. Ask people to indicate verbally when they are complete e.g. "I pass the talking piece" or "piece back into the center" to signal that they are finished and the next person can pick up the virtual talking piece to speak. [See the two-page circle facilitation process resource here.](#)

TIPS: HARVESTING

On the phone it can be a bit more challenging to do participant collaborative harvesting, but if your participants can be online at the same time they are on the phone, consider integrating low-bandwidth web-based collaboration tools to create shared electronic notes using tools like Google Docs, Google Slides, or Jamboard, even a WhatsApp chat where people can respond to prompts as if they were in a Zoom chat room. This is a great way to increase participant engagement during the call, and harvests that are co-created have a better chance of being co-owned.

As a facilitation team you might also think about having your own Google Doc where you can be harvesting in real-time and trading off roles as needed.

It's important to distribute the notes right away and highlight any follow-up actions or next steps, and share how their advice or concerns will be used, and if you can't use it to tell them why and what to do next. Then people can be invited to reply if they have further questions or concerns.

Facilitating non-video conference calls can be like working in a dark room, but bringing our design, hosting practice, and attention to enabling good participation in this environment can create meaningful and valuable engagement.

Created May 2020 by Amanda Fenton (with gratitude to Nancy White for her [Telephone Conference Call Tips](#) (some of this content is borrowed from Nancy's post).