Don't Lose the Connection: Virtual Visits for Older Adults

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Published online: 25 Jul 2019.

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ABSTRACT

Little research is available concerning the use of technology to connect non-mobile senior adults with museums. This paper explores the viability of Interactive Virtual Learning (IVL) programs to gauge the interests, preferences, and needs of the older adults. The authors drew from personal experiences presenting such programs to seniors and held focus groups with past participants to craft a survey. Seniors living in residential retirement communities answered the surveys as did their activity directors who act as coordinators for these IVL programs. Additional input was solicited from educators experienced in facilitating virtual visits (IVL) for seniors. This information was compared with the findings and comments from the returned surveys. Among the three groups, (seniors, activity directors and educators) many common ideas emerged which are offered as recommendations for organizations interested in developing similar IVL programs or conducting further research.

The importance and potential of synchronous technology for seniors

Research suggests that successful aging depends on a variety of factors, including involvement in meaningful activities and social connections with others.[1] Recent scholarship highlights the need for senior adults to engage in stimulating social interactions.[2] The National Institute on Aging recommends older adults engage in enjoyable pursuits, listing, among several options, museum visits and classes to help maintain cognitive ability.[3] Museums have the potential to play an important role in offering seniors access to culture and education.

But for many older adults with mobility challenges, or those living in retirement communities distant from cultural institutions, maintaining access to these resources can be difficult. For those who are unable to visit the museum in person, Interactive Virtual Learning (IVL) programs offer a form of access. In such programs, content providers connect with senior audiences for real time, live programs in which both sides see each other, converse, view images, and engage in experiments or studio projects as if they were in the same physical space. In these virtual visits a museum staff member, or content provider, presents information and facilitates dialogue. Virtual visits by groups of older adults can provide comparable experiences to on-site visits, prompting memories and spurring observation, discussion, and curiosity.

Over the last twenty plus years videoconferencing, (also known as Interactive Virtual Learning) or synchronous technology, has grown more user friendly, moving from specialized equipment required in the 1990s to cloud-based video solutions made available

through free applications on personal devices. Although videoconferencing for content delivery and collaborative projects was initially aimed at K-12 schools, in recent years organizations serving lifelong learners have discovered its benefits as well.[4] Today many content providers, among them approximately 40 museums in the U.S., already offer videoconference programming to senior audiences.[5]

Despite its potential to reach wide audiences, very little research has been conducted around the use of such technology to maintain a connection between cultural organizations and aging adults. But there is good reason to look more closely at this form of programing. As one senior participant noted,

> in our case, we gave up driving a few years ago, because of our age, and we can't get to the museum. But this gives a monthly opportunity to see things that are there, that in many cases we don't even know you have.[6]

For providers, the benefits can also be meaningful; some have reported that IVL presentations have unexpectedly connected them to primary sources of historical information while interacting with their audiences.[7]

Gathering information about virtual visits

Through focus group discussions, and surveys, we aimed to better understand how lifelong learners feel about videoconference technology. We further wanted to learn about motivations for attending virtual visits, as well as what older adults and activity directors look for in presenters and programs. To gain a fuller picture, we approached content providers who work with adult audiences for their insights as well. The feedback collected from these three populations (older adults in retirement communities, activity directors, and content providers) can assist museums who currently serve senior audiences with IVL programming or hope to do so.

To develop the surveys, two focus groups were convened, each group consisting of six residents plus activities coordinators. These groups were based at retirement communities that have scheduled monthly virtual visits for the last three years. We consider residents at these two retirement communities, Ohio Living –Breckenridge Village (Willoughby, Ohio) and River Landing at Sandy Ridge (Colfax, North Carolina), to be sufficiently familiar with videoconferencing and able to discuss it knowledgably from a participant's point of view. Two focus group sessions were conducted via video chat with the residents and activity directors from these communities. During the first focus group residents and activities directors shared their opinions about videoconferencing. In the second focus group session participants helped draft questions for other retirement community participants (Figure 1)

Forty retirement communities who had participated in previous virtual visits were approached to take the survey.[8] Given a choice of paper or on-line surveys for their residents, the activities directors unanimously chose paper. As a result, we sent each retirement community a packet of printed surveys and a postage paid return mailer. We received 120 completed surveys, 12% of which came from activity directors themselves. The older adults and activities directors were given the same survey questions to answer.

We also sent an informal request for input to a dozen content providers that had a history of presenting IVLs to seniors. There was no survey used with the content provider

1. What is your role in videoconferencing?
   o   Activities Coordinator or other paid staff position at institution/facility
   o   Audience/Participant in videoconferences
   o   Other
2. What are you looking for in a live interactive videoconference program? Please check all that apply.
   o   Rich Content
   o   Open Ended Discussion
   o   Question and Answer format
   o   Simulations/ Experiments/ Demonstrations
   o   Other (please explain your response below)
3. What are you looking for in an on-camera presenter in live interactive videoconferences?
4. How do you feel about using videoconferencing technology for accessing programs from museums or other content providers?   (Put an X near or on the closest answer).
(0) not comfortable   neutral   (100) very satisfied
5. How often do you attend or arrange programming for live interactive videoconferences? Choose the answer that best suits the frequency with which you attend.
   o   1-3 times per year
   o   4-11 times per year
   o   monthly
6. Have you ever participated in an online learning course, meaning a self-directed class accessible by internet that was not dependent on a live presenter? (yes/no) If yes, how often?
   o   1--3 courses of multiple sessions
   o   4--11 courses of multiple sessions
   Use space below for comments on internet, self- directed courses, including how many sessions are optimal.
7. If you have not participated in an internet based self-directed course please rate on the scale below your interest in participating this style of online learning. (Put an X near or on the closest answer).
(0) not interested   neutral   (100) very interested

8. What is your motivation for attending live, interactive videoconferences?
   o   Education
   o   Entertainment
   o   Other (please explain your response below)
9. Please check the digital learning experience you most prefer (a live interactive program, self-directed on-line course, both, none).
   o   Live interactive videoconference
   o   Self-directed on line course
   o   Both
   o   None (please explain your response below)
10. Is there anything else you would like us to know about videoconferencing with museums or other content providers? Feel free to mention topics of interest to you, ideal length of videoconferences, etc.

Figure 1 . Survey.

group. Instead, we solicited their comments. Content providers who responded to our request included The Royal Botanical Garden, Ontario, Canada; The Cleveland Institute of Music, The Cleveland Museum of Natural History; The Ohio History Connection, Columbus; The Dolphin Research Center, Grassy Key, Florida; and Fizzics Education, Blacktown, New South Wales, Australia.

Results are in!

According to feedback we received, the success of videoconferencing with older adults depends upon the following factors: (1) the style of the presentation, and, most importantly, the ability to ask questions and share experiences; (2) the educational content, (3) the extent to which presenters entertain older adults while providing this content and (4) the comfort and competence of activities directors and participants with the technology.

Style of presentation

First, the style of the interactive presentation was a significant factor for both the seniors and activity directors. Replying to the question, "what do you look for in an on-camera presenter?" several survey participants mentioned wanting information from those highly knowledgeable about their subjects. They also identified as desirable qualities warmth, friendliness and an energetic manner. One respondent expressed it as seeking, "someone engaging, knowledgeable, friendly, who can capture and keep the participants interest and attention."[9]

Based on our experiences we believe that on camera presenters should be sensitive to the wish of adult audiences to contribute to the discussion and that a conversational approach promotes better engagement. Comments collected from content providers expand upon this point. Karin Davidson Taylor, Education Officer of the Royal Botanical Garden (Burlington, Ontario, Canada) suggests presenters "provide opportunities or prompts for them (audiences) to share or express opinions – we can all learn from each other."[10] Kimberly Browne, School Program and Outreach Coordinator at the Dolphin Research Center in Grassy Key, Florida explains,

> I prep a little differently and present a bit differently for the adults. For kids sometimes, I feel like it is more edutainment whereas for the adults it is more like I am having a conversation … It can be much more relaxed."[11]

Those interested in developing videoconferences for lifelong learners should maintain the interactive style they use on-site, as the results suggest active participation in learning is essential for seniors who engage in virtual visits.

Content

While, as mentioned previously, facilitation of the Interactive Virtual Learning programs is important, survey respondents cited content as the major factor attracting them to presentations. Replying to Question 2 "What are you looking for in a live interactive video-conference program?" the answer Rich Content– one of five options—ranked highest at 80%. Other answers scored as follows: Open Ended Discussion 56%, Question and

Answer Format 56%, Simulations/Experiments/Demonstrations 59%. In the space provided for comments related to this question, respondents did not mention what type of experiments they would like to see. However, four people made general comments about the content that interested them: History (2), Geography (1) and Travel (1). Part of survey Question 10 specifically invited respondents to mention topics of interest. Sixteen people choose to list several topics, resulting in the following number of mentions: History (12), Travel and Nature (7 each), Art (5). Art History and Music (4 each), Religion (3), Black History (2), Philosophy (1). (Figure 2) The broad scope of these topics, the authors believe, is good news for cultural and science institutions which can flexibly interpret their collections to create IVL programs that address these stated interests.

Motivation

Survey Question 8 asked about motivation for attending or scheduling videoconferences. Respondents, not limited to one choice, scored the three options as follows: Education (92%), Entertainment (65%) and Other (3%) (Figure 3). Some respondents commented that they like to be entertained while learning. As one River Landing resident put it, "Education is my first goal, but I also like to be entertained. I just don't want to be lectured to the entire hour … "[12] This seems consistent with comments from Question 2 regarding

Figure 2 . What topics are of interest to senior learners.
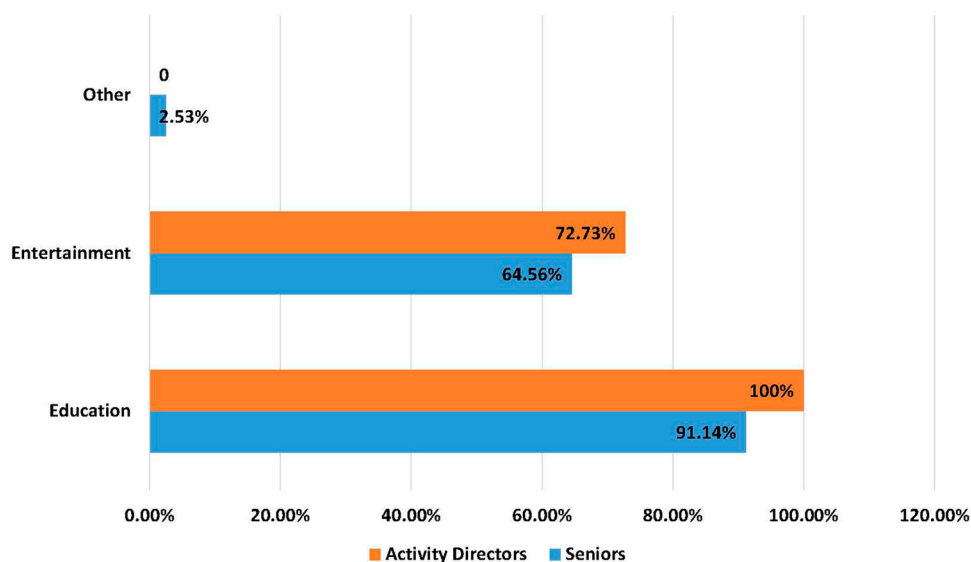
Figure 3 . Motivation for attending live videoconferences.

what is sought in an interactive videoconference. Many respondents answered in terms of what they wanted in a presenter using words such as humorous, smiles, personality, and happy (Figure 4). This idea is echoed by content provider Karin Davidson-Taylor, who explained that presenters should "make it (the videoconference) entertaining and engaging, but do not forget they (the audience) are there to be stimulated and educated."[13]

Technology

The comfort and competence of the educators with technology also plays an important role in successful videoconferencing. This feedback came primarily from activity directors who recalled technical challenges with sound and with blurry images. While the technology has vastly improved in the last few years, it is not foolproof.[14] Audio quality continues to be the greatest hurdle for senior audiences. Often activity directors will position themselves near the microphone and repeat the comments from the audience. This handy work-around benefits both the participants and presenter. Many content providers strongly encourage test calls before a virtual visit, especially for new participants. Test calls a few days before the actual program offer an opportunity for audio and video signals to be tested but they also serve as a time that the needs of the senior audience can be discussed.

   Both activity directors and residents prefer IVL over on-line courses as a delivery method for content. Question 6 asked if either of these groups had participated in a self-directed on-line course. Ninety-six respondents skipped Question 6, 19 answered and 20 made comments. Of the 20 who commented, 12 said they had no interest and 5 indicated they had taken a course but included buying DVDs in this category. Question 7 asked respondents to rate their interest in participating in a self-directed on-line course. Forty people skipped the question, and 75 indicated their interest by marking

Figure 4 . Qualities desired in an on-camera presenter.

on a scale of 0 (no interest) to 100 (very interested). The score among those who answered the question averaged 41, somewhat below neutral. The authors believe that retirement community residents overall have relatively little experience with self-directed online courses. It may also be the case that managing technology on their own is problematic. That not a single activity director opted for the on-line form of our survey for their residents suggests this conclusion. The relationship of retirement community residents to learning technology represents an area for further study.

Lessons and suggestions to help you remain connected to your aging audience

Organizations exploring IVL may find the notes below and in Figure 5 useful.

There are several factors to consider when developing virtual visits. First, do you have the technology available? You might want to buy a document camera to enhance the view of small artifacts or a green screen to bring up digital content behind the presenter, as seen in the familiar weather map used by TV meteorologists. Do you have the right people to deliver the programs? Are they knowledgeable about the content, engaging and easy to understand and not shy of technology or of being on camera? Finally, do you have educational programs that can be adapted for a virtual visit format?

Ideas for developing Virtual Visits for Adult Learners

- Active participation – seniors (like students) desire interactive programs
- Successful programs include content, demonstration, inquiry and discussion
- Use a conversational style, and provide opportunities to share experiences
- Recognize that the audience's experiences will contribute to a more in-depth conversation
- Programs should be educational, but should also provide entertainment
- Ideal presenters speak clearly, slowly, are knowledgeable, and allow adequate time for participants to respond
- Delivery counts – the presenter should address the audience as adults, and not speak down to them (as though they are children)
- Many subjects interest adult audiences, particularly history
- Encourage test calls and facilitate comfort with the equipment (for the content provider and the lifelong learning site)
- Stop frequently and be patient. Seniors may need additional time to think, as well as answer/formulate questions

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Figure 5 . Suggestions for museums.

Recognize that despite the distance, rewarding relationships can emerge. Activity directors often schedule virtual visits with a content provider for many years if they are confident of repeated high-quality experiences. In some cases, nearby retirement communities might plan visits for those adequately mobile to make the trip. While at the museum the seniors can tour the dedicated broadcast space and meet the presenters, a bonus that furthers the feeling of connection.

To foster involvement with content providers, some activity directors, such as those at River Landing, form resident committees to select from among various topics available for the virtual visit (Figure 6). Given the ability to choose what they want to learn helps engage the participants. Another group of independent lifelong learners who connect with the Cleveland Museum of Art from Lakeland Community College near Cleveland occasionally have one of their group interview the presenter before the virtual visit. The participant representative, then prepares a brief two paragraph introduction to the topic which he or she gives before the virtual visit begins. In terms of finding topics for their residents it should be noted that activity directors can search for various subjects by visiting the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration website (CILC.org) or by directly contacting museums that offer virtual visits.

Opportunities for museums interested in distance learning for seniors

Because people are living longer, and studies indicate that older adults need social and intellectual stimulation long after they have developed mobility issues, re-connecting them to cultural organizations via IVL is a compelling practice.[15] The older adults, activity directors, and content providers we surveyed and spoke with were all very supportive of IVL to connect with museums.

Technology has leveled the playing field for non-mobile older adults. Even ten years ago it would have been too complicated and costly for regular virtual visits to take place in senior communities. Today many retirement communities already have the basic tools, i.e. internet, a computer, speakers, microphone and web camera.

Figure 6 . River landing seniors connected to Philadelphia Museum of Art.

To continue to serve seniors, a growing segment of the population, more research is needed.[16] Topics for further exploration include: (1) how to train presenters to be responsive to the specific needs of seniors (2) how to determine what type of educational content is important to a particular audience with its variables of background, expectations and education and (3) how to assist activity directors on using the technology. Most seniors see themselves as lifelong learners, and this perception combined with the technical ability to reach beyond the walls of the museum is a promising situation.[17] Intellectually curious adults and cultural institutions can remain connected, engaged and learning from each other.

Notes

1. Eakman et al., "The Meaningful Activity Participation Assessment," 299–317.
2. Steptoe et al., "Social Isolation, Loneliness, and All-cause Mortality in Older Men and Women," 5797–801.
3. Participating in Activities You Enjoy. Accessed March 7, 2019. https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/participating-activities-you-enjoy.
4. Videoconferencing has long been associated with delivering educational content to schools. In the late 1990s, grants from large telecommunication companies connected K-12 audiences to museums for virtual fieldtrips. The Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration (CILC) was a part of this initiative and is still the major hub to find virtual visits for all ages.
5. The Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration website lists approximately 40 Lifelong Learner Cohort content providers identifying themselves as museums. Accessed March 9, 2019. https://www.cilc.org/Lifelong-Learners/Lifelong-Learning-Cohort.aspx.
6. Ohio Living - Breckenridge Village resident. Recorded videoconference focus group November 6, 2018.

7. Lee Gambol, Distance Learning Coordinator and Science/Health Instructor at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History recalls how, some years ago, while presenting the IVL program *Balto: A History of Humans, Huskies and Health in Alaska,* she gained firsthand narratives related to her topic. Two virtual visitors from the retirement home told poignant stories from their childhood about seeing the dog and helping raise money for his upkeep. Their memories prompted Lee to state, "What an honor it was, to meet people who were part of the actual event I'd been teaching about for years!" Reflecting further, Lee reported the desire to, pause and say, "Would you be willing for me to interview you and add your life experience to our museum's records?" E-mail to the authors February 28, 2019.

8. These retirement homes had scheduled virtual visits from the CILC website within the last two years in varying degrees of frequency.

9. Unsigned survey comments, recorded February 2019.

10. E-mail to the authors February 28, 2019. Karin Davidson-Taylor, Education Officer, Royal Botanic Garden, Burlington, Ontario, Canada.

11. E-mail to the authors 2/28/2019. Kimberley Browne, School Program and Outreach Coordinator, Dolphin Research Center, Grassy Key, Florida.

12. River Landing resident recorded videoconference focus group November 6, 2018.

13. E-mail to the authors February 28, 2019.

14. Communities that utilize videoconferencing technology need to make sure that the sound is properly amplified so even those participants in the back of the room can hear. In addition, the quality of the video is often impacted by network bandwidth and increasing the transmission speed may enhance the quality.

15. Average U.S. life expectancy increased from 68 years in 1950–1979 years in 2013, in large part due to the reduction in mortality at older ages. Accessed March 8, 2019. https://www.prb.org/aging-unitedstates-fact-sheet/ Population Reference Bureau Aging in the US Fact Sheet. Also see Steptoe et al., "Social Isolation, Loneliness, and All-cause Mortality in Older Men and Women," 5797–801.

16. United States Census Bureau, "Older People Projected to Outnumber Children for First Time in U.S. History."

17. Winerman "By the Numbers: Lifelong Learning."

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

About the authors

Dale Hilton Director of Adult and Distance Learning at the Cleveland Museum of Art manages Adult Continuing Education and with colleagues the docent program. She holds an M.A. in Art History from The University of Chicago and a BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. In Ms. Hilton's 28 years on the museum staff she has presented lectures, gallery talks, and written 47 videoconference scripts. Selected publications include *The Caring Museum: New Models of Engagement with Aging* and *Japanese Prints Today: Tradition with Innovation.*

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program at the museum, which brings the collection of the museum to K-12 schools, as well as life-long learning sites

Janet Zanetis, M.Ed., as an educator and university administrator, spent 20 years in K-12 and Higher Education. After 10 years in the corporate sector, she began her current role as the Managing Director at the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration. Janet's area of expertise is the application of video technologies. She has written extensively on this topic for education journals and has co-authored two books. She has been a presenter and keynoter at local, national and international education conferences. Janet is currently serving on the ISTE Board of Directors.

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