Afternoon Everyone

It's time to report back on our Science & Technology group meeting using Skype, which was held earlier this afternoon. We had a total of 8 participants who all managed the technology well, some having only been introduced to it during the last week. As preparation, I had carefully contacted each group member in turn to ensure that they had the latest Skype version and, in some cases, conducted a short trial video call to check that it was indeed the right person. Putting one's picture in the profile does help recognition when looking up a contact in the Skype database. Prior to the meeting I emailed out some guidance notes and strict instructions as to who should call who to avoid confusion. Apart from a technical hitch perpetrated by Skype with 5 minutes to go, which meant I had to find a workaround, the call went out on time and all the expected participants joined the call without problem.

Having once established that we could all see and hear each other, there seemed to be no need to ask for video closing to prevent video freezing or break up. Then as speaker, I launched into my Powerpoint slides by sharing my screen with the others. At one point I had to check with my audience that they were still in contact as they had been silent for so long and I wondered whether I had been talking to myself about the slides. Anyway they all responded (or woke up!) so I continued to the end; reached after about 45 minutes of presenting. I then cancelled screen sharing and we had a question and answer session in which whoever was speaking at the time was highlighted on the screen displaying all participants. The session ended with some playing around with the technology by bringing up some emoticons to silently express their views on the session. As far as I could tell, the video call was well received and it lasted just over 1¼ hours without problems.

As I said below, I am sure that Zoom also has a role to play, but its 40 minute restriction for group calls in its free version is a nuisance which can easily be got around with Skype.

Regards
Chris

Hi everyone

Congratulations to Chris and the Science Group for their Skype meeting.

I was a participant in my first Zoom transmitted Art History lecture yesterday. This was to replace a booked lecture to take place in London by my Art History tutor followed by a visit to the Titian exhibition at the National Gallery which could no longer take place. Age range of group is wide and includes those less in less health and using sticks etc for walking.

My Art History Tutor is Sian Walters which I know some of you have had a lecture from on Raphael at Arts Society. She is very professional and lectures full time runs her own business teaching Art History and consequently is very competent with slides with more than one painting on screen etc. This was her first Zoom experience. She had another lecturer helping remotely.

There were 28 participants and all were muted for sound and camera for the lecture (done by support lecturer so even if we tried to turn these on at our end they would be off) though we could send chat messages to the support lecturer if needed. The lecturer was a licensed subscriber as had paid for unlimited time on Zoom.

For reasons unknown Zoom kept ending the lecture at 40 minutes (licensed users have unlimited time so this was a fault) so the support lecturer reopened the meeting and we all had to go back to original log in to get back in. Fortunately it would seem we had all kept our email open so this was quick. No one struggled with the technology of joining the lecture as a participant even though with the breaks we had to do this three times in total. However this was a nuisance. We were assured that the reasons will be investigated so it does not happen next time. Before the meeting I had turned off wifi to all other devices except the laptop I was using and Pete had his iPad which he used

to read his online newspaper. We have Virgin cable broadband and I was near our router but not Ethernet connected. Despite all this there were odd moments when Sian's voice broke up a bit and I had a sign saying 'Your Internet connection is unstable' across the screen at those moments. I am not technically competent enough to know why as we do not normally have a problem.

In total I was online for the lecture for just over an hour. This was followed by just over 20 minutes of questions. The comments by participants were the whole experience was great. It was great to have something usual to do.

In our normal Art History teaching format in a hall we would break after an hour's lecture for coffee and then reconvene for another 40 minutes combined lecture and questions. But for right now I found the online experience quite long as a participant. It made me think about me right now. Sian is a fantastic lecturer and makes everything interesting and normally I learn a great deal from her lectures. Yet I could feel my mind going off into the myriad of other things I am doing and coping with right now. There were no technical questions from participants at the end. The very few questions were fairly general. Participants started to ask one another how they are and how they are coping. I felt this was telling because as a group in a lecture room there are quite technical questions.

I think this may be quite informative for U3A. I think there is a lot of technical competence required to do a presentation and even with technical support online when the talk is going on things go wrong. I am normally able to hold on to a lot of detailed information in my head at one time but I struggled to stay focussed. For these reasons I would suggest that for most groups that manage online group meetings during this shut down situation they may be best having discussions rather than attempting too much formality or technical competence. I think 40 minutes is plenty of time and all the time I could give to a group meeting right now. I have too many other calls on my time. It would just be lovely to have a group meeting even if it lacked much in the way of structure. Those that really want to manage more technical presentations will jump in and do it because they have the competence to do that already and the energy to manage it.

Hope this helps

Best Wishes

Judith

Hi Everyone

Judith's comments in her last paragraph struck a chord with me after yesterday's Science & Technology Skype meeting. It went well I think because of the preparation and because the participants are in the main technically minded. However Judith's point about video conference call duration and the need for energy to lead and manage such a call has merit.

Until we become more familiar with the technology (and maybe beyond that time) it is a greater demand on participant's attention and in a slightly different way to what is required in a normal face to face group meeting. So I could agree that as more U3A groups use the technology, they shouldn't be over ambitious to fully replace their normal face to face group activity but instead target (say) a call no longer than 1hr to 1½hr duration.

Regards
Chris