Web + seminar

How to arrange a webinar

Foreword

For more than ten years we have tried out various sites for holding online meetings and seminars for different collaborative projects in the Nordic region. It began with the Minerva project *Boldic* and the Nordplus projects *Nordflex* and *Den nordiske stemme*. It continued in *Boldic perspectives online* and in *SKJÁR*. Moreover, there has been extensive testing in the Nordic distance learning network DISTANS (an expert group in the Nordic Network for Adult Learning), and in my own organization, the Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE – NFF).

We organised large and lengthy conferences, both synchronously and asynchronously. We have used many different meeting platforms, hosting meetings with few participants (e.g. project meetings), and with many participants (up to a hundred). We have tried out using audio and video synchronously, and we have used audio for some and instant messaging (chat) for others.

Summing up, we have now developed a synchronous format that we use quite frequently, the webinar (combination of web and seminar). Several of us have chosen to purchase a license for a

particular online meeting platform, while others alternate between a number of free platforms. On the basis of experience gained over the years, this publication sets out advice and suggestions on how webinars can be established and implemented.

The following topics are discussed:
What is a webinar?
Preparation
Advertising
Implementation
Common start-up problems
List of meeting and conference platforms

Thanks to Svend Andreas Horgen, the Sør-Trøndelag University College, for his words of advice. We invite readers to submit their own tips, experiences and suggestions to include in a revised edition, please send suggestions to slaatto@nade-nff.no or add it to the wiki on:
http://distans.wetpaint.com/page/Web+Conferencing

This publication was developed in conjunction with the Nordic project *SKJÁR* (Nordplus Voksen) and the Nordic-Baltic Nordplus project *Boldic perspectives online*. Both projects have a strong element of knowledge exchange through the use of online meetings/webinars.

Oslo, 25 October 2011

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1. What is a webinar?

The word webinar is composed of <u>web</u> and sem<u>inar</u>, and is a convenient abbreviation of "Seminar on the net" or "online seminar". It is also known as web conferencing, online conferencing and others. When the Internet was new, many attempts were made to organize conferences online. They could go on for several days, feature multiple presentations and subsequent debates divided into many discussion threads. The experiments were interesting, but perhaps no huge success. Instead, other forms of online meetings have developed, among them the faster webinar format, which is shorter and where discussions take place there and then.

Webinars, or online seminars, have proven to be a truer product of the Internet than the web conference. While experiments with web conferences were by far a direct transfer of a physical event to a digital format, the webinar to a greater extent reflects the Internet's unique characteristics. It's short, fast, network-building, fragmented and dependent on being placed into a larger context.

Definition

A webinar is an online meeting about a specific topic, for participants to listen to a lecture, brainstorm a problem or a combination of the above. When there is one-way communication, it is called a webcast. Webinars are usually recorded, so that it can be played back at a later date.

Definition given by Webopedia:

Webinar - short for Web-based seminar, a presentation, lecture, workshop or seminar that is transmitted over the Web. A key feature of a Webinar is its interactive elements - the ability to give, receive and discuss information. Contrast with Webcast, in which the data transmission is one way and does not allow interaction between the presenter and the audience. (http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/W/Webinar.html 27112010)

Preparation for a webinar

An hour long webinar may require several hours of preparation. Thorough preparation of the technology is crucial. Many webinars have been cut off due to technical difficulties, connection problems, sound issues etc.

Choosing a meeting platform

After deciding the specifications for the form of the meeting, the communication options, the number of participants etc, you should choose a meeting platform. Many start at the other end, by looking at various meeting platforms to get an overview of the opportunities that exist. It will affect how the webinar is organized. There are a variety of online meeting platforms and many of them are free. Some require downloading software, while others only require web access. See an overview of some platforms below, point 6.

Meeting platforms have different functions and limitations: In addition to audio, voice and instant messaging, they will often have the opportunity to share the screen, show presentations, write on a board, create mind-maps and implement short, quick opinion polls.

Tips:

It can be useful to try out different platforms, compare features and find out what is important for the type of webinar you wish to arrange. If you need to buy a license, it is particularly important to test the platform before signing a contract.

In Nordic networks, we have tried out many different platforms such as, Marratech, DimDim, Horizon Wimba, Skype, Elluminate, Adobe Connect. The experiences are many and the limitation of sound quality, picture quality and presentation vary.

Test if your computer has the correct setup in advance of webinar. If you are using Adobe Connect you can test this here:
http://na3cps.adobeconnect.com/common/help/en/support/meeting_test.htm

A video on the use of Adobe Connect in general, 'Magnus Nohrs digital world', can be found here:
http://www.uninett.no/adobeconnect/

- and more on how to get started on Adobe Connect:
http://www.youtube.com/user/magnusnohr#p/u/4/Q6j_-F8Wr1s

When is a webinar a suitable form of cooperation?
In the Nordic distance learning context, we have used webinars in professional discussion and networking for several years. The use of technology in education has been a frequently recurring theme in webinars. We have found that a webinar is particularly suited to discuss specific academic issues. It serves as a stopover point for academic and professional reflection and networking, and it provides access to more knowledge. Mostly we have used a format where we have had one or more speakers followed by discussion. The interview format, where the meeting chair interviews an academic has also been used. Experience shows that webinars are best suited for brief in-depth discussion on a specific issue.

Tip: Based on the actual theme to be discussed, choose a clear and defined issue and take time to find an engaging approach to the theme.

Tip: A program can, for example, look like this:

12:00 Welcome by the Head of the University for Nature and Environment, Annar X. Skorfeste
Short presentation of all the participants, where they write in the chat field their name and place of work.
12:15 Introduction by the lecturer Gunilla S. Kjølbogen: *Online learning for wild boar hunters - special focus on animation and gaming effects.*
12:35 Discussion via instant messaging, 'chat'. Four oral presentations of max 1 min. Sign up to post messages during the chat session (on a first come first served basis). Participants are welcome to ask questions and give comments during the introduction. (Alternative: An open chat discussion, where the speaker can contribute with questions.).

12:55 Summary

13:00 Thank you for now – welcome back to the same meeting next Thursday at the same time.

This sample webinar programme is of course not a definitive answer. It is possible to change the program. It is also effective to use an interview format rather than an introduction by a speaker. The chairman would ask a specialist or expert relevant questions and participants can follow up with their own questions. Variation in format is highly recommended.

Is it possible to combine a webinar and seminar?
 Is it possible to have some participants sitting together in a physical meeting and some online? It is of course possible, with a large screen and a microphone to capture the participants in the physical meeting room. The experiments we have done have shown that such combinations do have some weaknesses. Since participants have different 'requisites', a meeting can easily become unbalanced. The meeting can either largely take place online, with activities on the screen calling a lot of attention, or it can go the opposite way, with too much emphasis being on the physical meeting room. If the participants in the physical conference room work from their own computers instead of collectively, it can easily cause disruption. Here it is necessary to do further testing to find ways to successfully combine physically present participants with online participants.

Enabling participants

Learning theories based largely on empirical evidence say that students tend to learn more and more effectively during an event if they are active and participate in some way. This also applies to a webinar. Different methods to enable participants in a digital meeting will stimulate and provide greater benefit for the majority of participants. However, this format has both strengths and limitations regarding participation. Nordic experience shows that webinars with a good deal of discussion and exchange of views create greater satisfaction among participants than webinars where the meeting chair or speaker talk for the majority of the time. Nevertheless, a prerequisite for a discussion via verbal dialogue is that the sound quality is satisfactory for all. Echo, noise, background noise are destructive for webinars. An alternative is to let the discussion take place in writing via chat, while the speaker and possibly the chairman participate verbally.

How long should a webinar last?

The length of the webinar will obviously vary according to requirements. Within the Nordic distance learning environment we have experienced that an online seminar has **an optimal length of an hour**. A seminar format is intense; participants have to sit at a computer while concentrating on listening, commenting and writing. After an hour, participants' concentration starts to wane. Since one would usually participate in a seminar while at work, it can also be difficult to switch off from other activities for a long period of time. It is quite possible to double the webinar duration, but ensure a break is included, such as 2 x 45 minutes sessions with a break between. When a webinar is used as a workshop, where there is primarily a discussion and debate over specific issues, it can work well with a morning session and an afternoon session, with individual work between sessions.

Meeting management and administration/host

Regardless of the meeting platform chosen, there must be a responsible host/organizer and chairperson. For experienced people, this may be the same person, but it is often better to split the roles. The administrator is responsible the technical administration of the meeting, ensuring the participants are given a microphone (if there will be oral discussion), making sure that the programme for the webinar is shown at the start of the webinar, that the design of the screen is suitable, and that presentations/images appear at the right time.

Tip: Administrators should thoroughly review the platform's features.

The chairman has a responsibility comparable to leading a physical seminar. Many meeting platforms have a function to request the floor, and the chairperson must of course supervise this. This may require some scrolling up and down on the participant list.

Tip: Be alert for new versions and new features in existing platforms, and also completely new **meeting platforms that come on the market.**

If you, as the chairman, fiddle with the viewing of documents or other things, say what you are doing so that participants are aware that something is happening.

The choice of audio, video, board, presentation etc.

Preferably one would use advanced features in a meeting platform, however it is wise not to use more functions that is actually needed. Why not? Simply because it can often result in too much

button pressing and technical elements which can take the focus away from the actual content of the webinar.

AUDIO

When the webinar consists of a presentation that takes two-thirds of the time with the remainder given to discussion you might want to consider using instant messaging instead of having an oral discussion. Sound can often prove to be a challenge for a number for reasons; audio transmission can be of varying quality or the setting on each individual computer can be wrong, or many turn on the microphone at the same time and so on. Potential problems can be limited by giving careful instructions as to how the sound is connected, the use of headphones and otherwise caution with the on and off feature for audio.

When there are small groups, sound is important, so use headphones, otherwise it may result in an echo.

VIDEO

In its early days, the webinar attempted to have a video connection for all participants. Experience has shown that it is wise to limit the use of video to those that are speaking, such as the speaker and chairman. With few participants it is seldom a problem to connect to everyone's video and during a discussion it can often be beneficial. For some participants, they perhaps find it easier to participate without the video on. It is the individual participant that determines whether they will turn on the camera or not.

TEXT

Most online meeting platforms have a field for written communication (instant messaging/chat). Text often proves to be an effective form of communication in a webinar.

Tips for the speaker: Be active on chat - ask for opinions, ask simple questions and ask participants to respond via chat.

Tips for the participant: Be an active user of chat - engage yourself by asking questions and commenting on other people's comments. Use it if you wish to send messages to individuals among the meeting participants.

Tips for the meeting chair:

Why not prepare a 'poll', or instant survey, with one question? It can work well as a warm up exercise and can provide useful information about the participants. For example: Have you attended webinars before? Yes / No. Have you taught adults? Yes / No. Such surveys can also be used in conclusion to immediately evaluate the webinar.

Most meeting platforms have a special field, a 'board', for displaying documents. Normally the speaker or chairperson will use this feature. However, there is nothing to say that participants shouldn't also use this feature to share documents, but it should be agreed in advance and supervised by the administrator or chairman. In workshop webinars it is possible to upload documents from several participants. It is also possible, on several platforms, to write directly onto the document that is being shown.

Technical equipment for the participants

What equipment do I need to take part in a webinar? Basically the equipment already available: Computer, Internet connection (the faster the better), web camera (built-in cameras are okay and generally fitted in newer computers) and headphones. It hasn't been extensively tested yet, but mobile webinars could come to be widely used in the future.

Tip: Go into the online meeting room and test that the audio and video works before the webinar begins. Many platforms have a 'troubleshooting page' where you can test whether your computer has the correct settings. Furthermore, there are also setting options within the meeting room (in the toolbar). It is advisable to do a test run of the settings before the meeting.

Technical equipment for the organizer

In reality the webinar organizers don't need more advanced equipment than the participants. However it is obviously very important that the organizer's internet connection, sound and image are stable. Any failures of the organizer's or presenter's computer will impact everyone - therefore readily available reliable backup solutions are particularly important.

Tip: Have a backup ready if the network connection goes down. Preferably, you should also have a second camera and an extra set of headphones readily available.

Advertising / Marketing

Brief information about the webinars can include: Topic, purpose, goals, audience, speaker, time and location. The 'location' should **link to the online meeting room** and give instructions on how to join the meeting (such as the login details). It is advisable to include information about the equipment, different software versions and other things that are important for participants to ensure they can successfully participate. It is of course always wise to advertise in good time, BUT it is probably profitable to do a thorough marketing effort two to three days ahead of the meeting and possibly repeat the message the same day. Evidence suggests that attending a webinar is, to a large extent, a last minute decision. Many may note webinars in their calendar but if they aren't motivated on the day before or the same day to take part the webinar can often be passed over in favour of other work tasks.

Occasionally a registration process is used. With mandatory registration the meeting site can keep track of the degree of interest and who wishes to participate. It also provides an opportunity to send a direct reminder to potential participants a few hours before the webinar. When you are not dependent on knowing who and how many are joining it works well to advertise the direct link to the meeting, without registration.

Tip: Use social media and networking sites to invite participants to a webinar. Currently, advertising through the following has worked well; Twitter, Facebook groups and various Ning networks. Next year there may be other groups and media that provide results.

Tip: Give participants the exact technical details - what equipment is needed, any necessary software that should be downloaded (some meeting platforms require it) and link to the login page for the meeting.

Implementation

A well prepared webinar, with backup solutions for the technical equipment and a good division of responsibilities between the chairman and speaker, is almost guaranteed to be successful. A fairly strict **structure** should be prepared in advance, everything should be "Timely and prepared," as Egon from the comedy series, the 'Olsen gang' would say. A simple **programme** that specifies the times and topics is key and should be available on the screen as the webinar starts.

Tip: Open the meeting in plenty of time. Welcome each participant via chat as they appear online. It's a good thing to include each participant from the start.

Inclusion of participants

The chairman or speaker should spend some time initially to form a group dynamic so that everyone feels included and is aware of the other participants. Each participant should get the chance to actively join the webinar. When audio is being used, and there aren't too many participants, everyone can be invited to say their names and where they work. This will also be an opportunity to test the sound quality. A good alternative is to start by asking everyone a simple question, with responses given through chat. The question might be: Write your name and where you work. Or: Where are you geographically located? Or: What do you see outside the window? How is the weather where you are? Through a simple activity such as this all participants have the opportunity to gain a sense of community. The chairman or speaker may wish to refer to the responses on an ongoing basis – to mention the participants by name, thereby making them feel included, contributes to creating a sense of community.

Tip: The speaker should use the meeting platform's 'board' to set up key topic points, a standard Power Point presentation can be used. Most meeting platforms allow you to show videos and websites, and send active links in through the chat function.

Is any special pedagogic training required for webinars?

Do lecturers and speakers need special training to present online? We have not found such a course as yet, but one comes a long way with some advice and tips. The best training is perhaps practice, particularly through watching recordings and evaluating what works well and less well.

Speakers at a webinar have much less physical leeway than the speakers at a physical seminar. It is important that the speaker keeps calm in front of the camera and does not make big movements. Facial expression and small gestures work well. Conciseness is important, but even more important than that is the restriction of the theme and content. If the topic is clearly limited, it is possible to delve deeper into the material.

Since a webinar in many ways is a form of 'multitasking' for participants the speaker's face is not as central as in a physical workshop. In addition to watching the speakers in the small video window, participants are concerned with what appears on the board, what is being written in chat, not to mention that they might be writing themselves. Attention is therefore divided and the speaker's facial expressions are not the main focus. Voice usage is, however, very important and therefore the sound quality must be good.

Tips for the speaker:

Thorough preparation, a good dose of energy in the presentation - and otherwise be yourself! For next time: Watch the footage of your own introduction and learn from it.

Tip: It is advisable to monitor when the camera is turned on, so you are not caught doing your makeup!

Tip: It is also important to ensure that the connection is closed after the webinar is over, otherwise the meeting platform will continue to broadcast everything that happens at the computer (if the microphone is turned on).

How to activate and stimulate debate in a webinar?
In general, experience has shown that it is easier to get a debate going through chat rather than verbally/audio. Chat is also faster and more concise and thus perhaps better suited to the webinar format. However, in some cases verbal discussion can be suitable, and for webinars with few participants verbal discussion can often encourage closer and better communication than the use of just chat. In webinars with more than 40 participants verbal communication is not sufficient. A combination of audio and chat is of course possible.

Sometimes a healthy debate goes ahead without special measures to stimulate and encourage participation. However with groups who are unfamiliar with webinars, or who are not so comfortable with expressing their views, some simple measures can be taken:

> Concrete questions with a request to write a reply.
> Concrete questions to a specific person who is comfortable with expressing his/herself.
> Questions that have been agreed and prepared in advance and can therefore be taken up during the debate.
> Tasks/activities for participants that encourage interactivity.

Common start-up problems

In the Nordic projects where we have used the webinar format, we have experienced a number of teething problems. Sound quality is a recurrent problem. Advance testing can solve the problem, but it often crops up again. The wrong settings on the computer of one of the participants can often result in a lot of noise and echo. It is therefore important that that participant mutes their sound until the problem is resolved. It is of course crucial that the sound on the computers of the speaker and chair work well.

Tip: Test out the platform meeting in advance. Include the speaker in the test run, to check both the audio and screen presentation.

Tip: A quick presentation of the participants (if not too many) will reveal the sound quality of each individual.

Tip: Presentation of the participants is important, whether it be by voice or by chat. Use a question to encourage participants to write something. To say what their name is or where they come from will often be a good start for a webinar. Participants will then have the opportunity to actively join in the meeting and will feel welcome.

Tip: Where webinars only last an hour it is important to use the time economically. Do not allow for long presentations, by either participants or the speaker.

When the webinar concept was new and meeting platforms were also still in the development stage there were often a lot of user problems. It is advisable to dedicate some preparation time to help participants take part. A briefing on the board or an advance notification with an explanation of the various functions can be worthwhile. The notification should encourage participants to test out the meeting room in advance of the webinar.

There will always be cause for so-called 'technical problems'. Often it is not technical but human error. How should one deal with the technical problems which crop up at the start of the meeting or in the middle of the presentation? Thorough preparation. An inexperienced administrator should have a technical expert ready in the event of an emergency. When using a completely new meeting platform, you should contact the suppliers so ensure they are on hand with technical support when needed.

List of meeting and conference platforms

There are many conference platforms available on the Internet, some of them are free to use and others are licensed. The best advice is to try out the ones that are free or available for a trial period, or else consult with someone who has experience. A small list of platforms that can be used for webinars are listed below. This list is not exhaustive.

Dimdim	www.dimdim.com
Elluminate	www.elluminate.com
Horizon Wimba	www.wimba.com
Confy Webmøte	www.confy.eu/info/
Microsoft Live Meeting	www.microsoft.com/online/office-live-meeting.aspx
Web Conferencing	www.webconference.com
Acrobat Connect Pro	http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/
Connect	www.interwise.com
GoToMeeting	www.GoToMeeting.com
LiveMeeting	http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/livemeeting/default.aspx
Sametime	www.ibm.com

VIA3   www.viack.com

WebEx Meetings   www.webex.com

WiredRed   www.wiredred.com

Yugma   www.yugma.com

Test out meeting platforms online

Online Meeting Tools Review has conducted a test of 36 online meeting platforms, assessing the web conferencing and webinar solutions offered. An overview of what each platform offers and what they cost can be found here:

http://www.webconferencing-test.com/en/webconference_home.html

Wikipedia also has comparison of 30 online platforms available here:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_web_conferencing_software