

## **Video Calls: When I Stopped Dancing Through Life**

### **By: Stephanie Lang**

Scene: Steph's Home Office 2020-2021

Zoe: Hey Steph, do you have time to talk about the project?

Steph: (genuine enthusiasm) I sure do, looking forward to it!

Zoe sends Steph a Zoom invite. Steph receives the invite. Her heart sinks...

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In the Covid era, how people worked became rigid. It seemed like every phone call became a video call. Before Covid, I walked from meeting-to-meeting and had the freedom to take calls from anywhere. After Covid, I was tethered to my computer. For some, looking at a screen for eight hours a day in the same physical position was fine. For others like me, the kinesthetic processors and people who have repetitive strain injuries (RSI) from computer overuse, it was soul crushing.

I share my story because I want to be transparent on why I join meetings by phone or without video. I also want those I work with to understand that I do this so I can bring my full self to our work.

### **From “Sponge” to “Scarecrow”**

*Our Los Angeles Office Manager announced on a conference call that all of our office candy machines are now free. My LA teammate shouted with energy “Skittles for everyone!” Everyone laughed. This memory circa 2017 still makes me smile.*

When I was in the workforce in 2011 through 2019, we had in-person meetings, conference calls, and audio phone calls. My teammates nick-named me “the sponge” because of my ability to absorb and remember information: the skittles moment (above), lessons learned, decisions that were made throughout the 30 iterations of developing a learning course, and so much more. When I met with people in-person or joined by phone, the information converted to long-term memory and I could effortlessly recall the information years later.

Interestingly, in 2020, when I joined meetings by video, I became the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz. I couldn't remember the information the next day or a week later. I could feel my brain trying to trigger my memory - nada, zip, nothing. I was sad, angry, and wanted my brain back. (If you want to know how I felt, listen to *Ride* by Lana Del Rey. The lyrics “I've got a war in my mind” capture this moment perfectly.)

Since then, I have observed how my brain processes information. I realized that I process information best auditorily and kinesthetically:

- On a phone call, my brain can access the deepest level of active listening.
- As I'm listening, I hand-write stream of conscious notes or walk around.

My auditory and kinesthetic processing power is strong because of my period of enhanced neuroplasticity. My memory on audio phone calls is strong because of the lack of distractions during the memory encoding process.

### **In the Dance Studio: My Period of Enhanced Neuroplasticity**

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change: the brain responds to stimuli, which influences the strength or weakness of synapse connections. When a connection is repeatedly used, it creates a strong neural pathway. If a connection is not used, it becomes weak and dissolves. From age three to 25, we experience enhanced neuroplasticity. This is when our brains are most malleable and our strengths develop.

My period of enhanced neuroplasticity was spent in the dance studio, listening to music, and pairing sound with physical movement. I studied and performed ballet, tap, contemporary jazz, Broadway jazz, lyrical, modern, hip-hop, and world dances such as Bharatanatyam and West African dance. I danced at my local studio, attended the Orange County High School of the Arts' Commercial Dance program, and did summer intensives in California and Massachusetts. I was in the studio 10 to 20 hours a week during the school year and 40 hours a week in the summers. In college, I continued my study of dance and went on to perform professionally in Los Angeles and Las Vegas with a classical dance troupe.

Studying this artform required careful listening to music and specific execution of movement. Some pieces we performed were choregraphed to the beat, a hair behind the beat, to the lyrics of a song, to music in different time signatures (3/4, 7/8), or acapella, requiring us to be our own metronome. We also performed dances with live accompaniment where music was the form of communication. For example, in West African dance, when the djembe drummer did a "break," we knew to transition to the next section of movement and match their tempo.

My brain is physically wired to listen and move. When I join a meeting by phone and hand-write notes or walk around, I use these same neural pathways to process, synthesize, and retain information. As a result, I am performing at my best.

## Connection Between Distractions and Memory Conversion

In my exploration of how the brain processes information, I learned that the number of distractions when memory encoding takes place can impact one's ability to convert a short-term memory into a long-term memory. This helps explain why my brain processes the two mediums differently. On a phone call, I am able to fully pay attention because there are no or very few distractions. On a video call, there is a lot of stimuli that my brain has to parse relevant from non-relevant data, which means my brain is not fully paying attention and processing the important information.

Here are some of the distractions I experience on a video call:

- **Poor audio quality:** The “are you there? ... your mouth is moving, but I can't hear you... you cut out for the past 20 seconds, please say that again” that we have all heard over the past couple of years.
- **Frozen video feeds:** Being deep in conversation and then all of a sudden: “Andrew, your video froze, are you still there?... It froze in a funny spot, your face looks funny, ha-ha.” The conversation just lost focus and it takes brain power to regroup.
- **Visual stimulus overload:** This is the equivalent of going to Meow Wolf for me. If ten people are on a call, there are 10 different visual backgrounds to process. I'm seeing 10 bookcases, 10 whiteboards or posters, 10 plant collections, and more. Then, someone walks with their laptop on camera and I start to get dizzy.
- **Facial expressions:** I can't tell if someone's facial expression is in response to what I'm saying or something else they're looking at on their screen.
- **People in the background:** Roommates or family members doing things in the background. For example, the shirtless man coming out of the bathroom (for real, saw that), the roommate making lunch (yummy), and someone's grandparent unpacking groceries (yay for multi-generational relationships).
- **Pets:** The coworkers' pets that pop up on screen. The cat walking across the desk and then, someone's dog comes on the screen... out of nowhere.
- **Coworkers multi-tasking:** The email or Slack notification pings and I see someone swivel their neck, read the message, and respond. I then think to myself, is this person paying attention to what's happening on our call?

It takes cognitive energy to process all this visual and auditory noise, which inhibits my ability to fully focus, actively listen, and remember the information.

## **Conclusion**

When people turned on their video cameras for work calls, they invited everyone into their personal living quarters. I don't think it's fair or realistic to ask coworkers to regulate their private-home environment. I would never ask a colleague to lock their cat in the basement for 8 hours a day so it doesn't walk across the screen or tell their roommate that they can't use the kitchen because they're going to be in the background of a work call. These are all natural and inevitable moments of the work-from home culture.

At the same time, while some people choose to have their camera on, I choose to have my camera off. I have to control my environment so I can fully pay attention, remember what happened, and do my best work.

Know that when my camera is off, I have your back. When you want to remember something from 10 years from now, you can call me and I will tell you. And when you would like to see my face, I will happily meet you in the office, at a coffee shop, or at your work dining table. I love in-person camaraderie and always enjoy the chance to connect in real life, human to human.

## **Recommendations for Individual Team Members**

1. Play with your work from home freedom and try a walking meeting. You could take your call walking in the park, around the block, or at the beach. I even have a friend who likes to take a walking meeting while hiking.
2. Self-advocate for what you need to do your best work. Technology is not universal and not everyone uses technology in the same way. This piece is about video calls. However, you may want to advocate for yourself around how you use messaging technology, email, or some other type of work technology.
3. Advocate for your peers that have consented for your help. If you know that your coworker has a specific need and a workplace practice negatively impacts them, dialogue with your coworker about it. Ask them what their experience is and if it would be okay to advocate on their behalf when needed.
4. If you are experiencing a computer work-related injury (finger, hand, wrist, elbow, neck, shoulders, or low back) and are currently taking all of your calls at the computer on Zoom, see what calls you could take as an audio phone call.

I have a repetitive strain injury (RSI) in my hands from computer overuse. When my RSI flares up, it feels like the muscles in my hands are burning and the pain lasts for weeks. My physical therapist recommended that I stop taking every call at the

computer and encouraged me to take calls away from the computer. One of the strategies of mitigating the effects of an RSI is to vary one's physical position, which helps decrease the RSI from triggering.

### **Personal Note to My Students and Learning Participants**

You may be reading this and I may be teaching you on Zoom. I wanted to share that precisely what inhibits my ability to download information on video calls is what makes me strong in facilitating virtual learning. I hope that my personal experience with the video call medium makes me a more inclusive learning professional.

Video call meetings can be overstimulating when I need to download and synthesize information. However, when I teach online, I've already downloaded and studied the information. My brain can then focus on all the visual input and I see everything: hands being raised, text in the chat, emojis popping up, and when facial expressions change. I then stop and check-in so we can stay in sync.

We sometimes do vulnerable work that brings up emotions in class. I know from studying the video call medium that it's difficult to read people's emotions accurately: the facial expression is being communicated without the person's full body language and visceral energy. That's why I often ask about emotions in class. One time, a student was about to do a difficult role play and I couldn't decipher their facial expression. I stated: "I'm picking up on some anger, but I realize I may be misreading your expression. Can you help me understand what's going on?" The participant then shared that they were nervous. (Nervous is related to fear. Anger and fear are different emotions.) Now that I knew what the emotion was, I was able to help them.

I know that video communication technology is not universal and encourage students to join class in the way that works best for them. I was teaching an evening class and before class started, a student shared with me: "I'm not Gen Z, I wasn't born looking at a screen all day. I've been on a computer all day and my eyes are burning." I told the student that today's class was discussion based and that they could call into the session from their phone. That way they wouldn't have to look at the screen.

I share this so you know that teaching on video doesn't impact me the way that video meetings do. I strive to be an inclusive learning professional and welcome feedback on your experience. See you in class!