

Hand signals improve video meeting success

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Credit: University College London

Using a simple set of hand signals can improve the experience of online meetings, make groups feel closer to each other and that they are learning and communicating better, finds a new study by UCL researchers.

The research team trained students to use a set of signals in seminars,

such as waving to take a turn to speak, and raising a [hand](#) to show empathy, and found evidence that they improved the experience of [video](#) meetings during lockdown. The first findings of the research project are available as a pre-print while the results undergo peer review.

Co-lead author Professor Daniel Richardson (UCL Psychology & Language Sciences) said: "As we have all moved meetings, classes and social interactions online in the last year, many of us have found that it can't replicate seeing people in person, and some have felt fatigued or isolated. Because you can't make eye contact or pick up on subtle nods, gestures and murmurs of agreement or dissent, it can be hard to know if people are engaged with what you're saying.

"While some people are trying to use more technology to improve [video conferencing](#), we wanted to investigate a behavioral method, and see if we could test it as rigorously as possible."

After the UK went into lockdown in 2020, Honorary Research Fellow at UCL and business coach Paul Hills drew on his experience using set hand signals in lifeguarding to develop a new way to communicate over video. The Video Meeting Signals system requires a group to use specific signals to show agreement or dissent, or to display concern and care, to congratulate someone, or to say you want to ask a question.



I don't understand / I need clarification (This sign is inspired by Laurel and Hardy!) . Credit: University College London

Hills then worked with an academic team to find objective evidence that his technique had a measurable effect. The UCL team recruited over 100 undergraduate psychology students who were participating in weekly seminars online in groups of 10. Half of the groups, chosen at random, were asked to use the Video Meeting Signals, while the other half were assigned to act as control subjects and were not taught the signs (they were still expected to keep their cameras on at all times). After their next two seminars over Zoom, the students completed a questionnaire evaluating their experience.

Students who used the hand signals gave significantly higher ratings for group affiliation, personal experience, and learning outcomes, and said the mechanics of their group interactions were improved. There were significant increases in agreement with sentences such as "I enjoyed the

seminar' (16% higher in the experimental group than the control group), I feel that I know the group (19% higher) and "I found it easy to exchange ideas in the seminar' (22% higher). Textual analysis of anonymous transcripts found that there were more positive and fewer negative words used by the students trained in the hand signals.

Paul Hills said: "We've developed a way to put body language back into video calls. By using hand signals, you can quickly and seamlessly react to what someone is saying, without interrupting conversation flow or pressing keys, and the signals can also convey nuance. Trust is vital to teamwork, and we hope that these hand signals can help to connect people so that they can collaborate better.

"As people continue to meet, learn and connect online, we hope that using these signals could make that time more productive and enjoyable."

The researchers now want to understand why the hand signals are effective. One possibility is that the training encourages students to engage and commit to the seminars, helping instill shared values. Other psychological studies have found that mirroring gestures and body language can increase social bonds and facilitate cooperation, which may be another reason why the signs had helped. In future work, the researchers are comparing the hand signals to the use of reaction buttons on video calls, using other forms of [body language](#), and other training techniques.

The set of signals, with their assigned meanings, is freely available online, so the researchers are encouraging people to try them out. Hills has been working with private companies and non-profits to adopt the hand signals, yielding positive testimonials from organizations such as AstraZeneca, the Cornwall Chamber of Commerce, and the Women's Institute.

More information: Paul Hills et al. Video Meeting Signals: A randomised controlled trial of a technique to improve the experience of video conferencing, *PsyArXiv* (2021). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/q3sa6](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/q3sa6)

Guide to the Video Meeting Signals (VMS): www.konektis.org/signals

Provided by University College London

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