

## CoolTimeLife Podcast 65 Space - The Lost Dimension - Blubrry transcript

Last week I spent a few more hours of my life on video chat calls, mostly on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. And as usual, most of the people I was interacting with had their cameras off, leaving me to stare at a mosaic of bland silhouettes. In some of these calls there was nothing really for anyone to look at anyway, no shared screens, no PowerPoints, nothing. Just your standard update meeting between people working together on a project, who were now present only by voice on a high bandwidth video chat technology platform. I asked myself, why didn't we just have this meeting as a telephone conference call?

Many people might not think there's any difference between a telephone-based teleconference or a Zoom call with cameras off. Don't they both achieve the same end? We meet, we talk, we move on. Same old, same old.

But I am going to suggest no, they are not the same. And the difference between these two scenarios highlights a significant aspect of how we learn, and how we communicate, as well as something we lost along the way. A special element that got quickly eclipsed by the shiny temptations of video conferencing; one that, once acknowledged, could make an enormous difference in the way we interact, and in how information and emotion are shared between us. As such it could contribute significantly to improvements in culture, engagement, and progress in the workplace.

Hello and welcome to CoolTimeLife. I'm Steve Prentice. Each of our CoolTimeLife episodes focuses on a topic dealing with people, productivity, technology, and work-life, and each offers ideas and facts you need to know about to thrive in today's busy world. An index of our podcasts is available at [cooltimelife.com](http://cooltimelife.com).

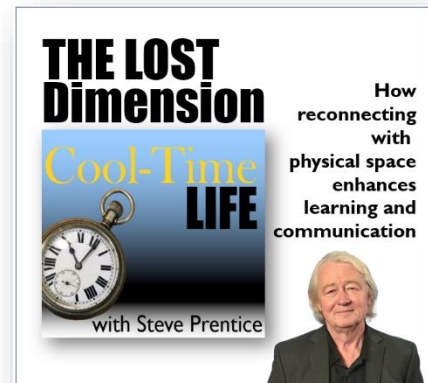
### The creative magic of the phone cord

It comes down to the tangible nature of talking. If you have ever watched TV shows or movies from the 1970s or earlier, you'll notice just how important the land line telephone was. Back then that was the only kind of telephone that existed. There were no cordless devices of note. Sure, people in the army had walkie talkies and the police had two-way radios, but for most civilians it was the telephone that became the essential device that allowed anyone to speak to other people over large distances without static.

In expensive restaurants throughout this period, a telephone could be brought to your table on a long cord, expertly threaded across the floor by a waiter – a mark of prestige for the select few who were favorites of the maître d'. In every other instance, the phone was an appliance that you went to in order to engage in a conversation. Usually located in a place of honor in the living room or parlor, and then later on the wall in the kitchen. But the word I want to focus on here is, "engage."

When people conversed using a landline telephone, they seemed to enter a unique mental space. Because the phone was essentially rooted to a single spot, so too was the caller. Even people with long extension cords on their home phones still had to stay in a localized area. So, what did they do while they chatted on these fixed appliances? They couldn't walk down the street. They certainly couldn't talk on them while driving their cars. They had to stay pretty much rooted to the spot, even if that spot was a restaurant table, a phone booth on a lonely street, or in the living room.

Their focus was what they were hearing through the earpiece, naturally, but what were they doing with their eyes? They would be looking around, seeing things in the room-space around them – pictures on the



wall, books on bookshelves, a window to the outside. They were seeing but not seeing – taking in the physical space of their surroundings as a context of the phone conversation. Most people of that era did not close their eyes in order to focus on the conversation, but in fact used their vision to somehow expand the experience and to focus more on the call itself.

And what did they do with their hands? Often, they toyed with the phone's handset cord, twirling it, or rearranging it. They directed energy into these small meditative actions, and in so doing once again magnified their connection to the conversation.

This physical and visual interaction with a caller is a highly significant part of the mental processing that goes into something as informationally rich as a telephone conversation – and has an even deeper significance in this age where our phones are more than just phones.

Now to see why this is so important, let's look at two places where a telephone is not generally present or needed. The first place is a tennis court, and next is an aquarium.

First, the tennis court. One of the best ways in which a person can focus their mind is to play tennis – or a similar sport that involves returning a ball over a net. Golf doesn't do this. There are too many variables. Nor do team-based ball sports like soccer, baseball or basketball – these involve too many other people. But think of sports such as two-person volleyball, pickleball, ping pong, badminton, maybe even handball and squash. What these all have in common is the focus on a distinct hand-to-eye activity, one that requires constant observation of the ball or shuttle in motion. It's not about interacting with other team players, it's about connecting with the ball, or shuttle, in a focused way. It's an activity that, despite its physical nature, helps focus the mind by allowing the eyes to follow that single object.

So, what about aquariums? Have you ever wondered why they are such a popular fixture in dentists' offices? It's because a nicely lit aquarium, filled with beautiful, colorful tropical fish, is a powerful stress reliever, one that provides the same type of visual distraction and mental focus as a moving tennis ball. An aquarium is something beautiful to look at, and this type of focus helps move people away from the anticipatory fear that is common in a dentist's waiting room.

A TV can't do that, even though many waiting rooms have TVs in them. They do the opposite. They occupy the mind with new information and stimulation, especially if they are tuned to a news station. That may be a source of distraction, but it is not a source of relaxation. The aquarium is a passive distractor. A source of peace and mental detachment that allows the mind to take its time and refocus on what it knows to be important. In addition to medical waiting rooms, an aquarium is also an excellent tool for creativity; a great catalyst for writer's block, stress, problem solving and prioritization.

These two examples – the tennis court and the aquarium, represent situations where the mind gets to relax because of easily manageable physical activities and a central, moving point of focus. The telephone in the pre-cellular era did the same thing. As I have just said, the limited mobility of a person using a land line allowed the eyes to drift over scenes that were both mundane and manageable while conducting a conversation. This too, was a source of passive focus.

You could argue that we do the same things with our mobile phones today. We make and take calls, certainly, but often, because the phone is mobile, so are we. We are on our way somewhere, maybe talking hands-free while driving, or having a conversation with earbuds while we do something else. Often that something else is another activity – not a passive tangible focal point like twirling a handset phone cord, but another activity that needs to get done simultaneously like returning emails or simply multitasking. The mobility of the mobile phone has forced us to pull up our anchors and with it a great piece of our mental creative process gets pushed aside.

To be fair, if you were having a conversation on your cellphone using earbuds or the speaker, while staring at an aquarium or building a tower out of Jenga blocks, I would say, “yes, you’re on the right track for replicating what people used to do with their landline phones,” but because that is seldom the case, the two generations of phone activity remain very different.

To me, a person engaged in a landline telephone conversation, essentially rooted to the spot and looking passively at their visual surroundings, is like a person engrossed in a good book. When you look at someone who is reading a good book, what do you see? Their entire body appears focused on this tangible device made of paper and ink – a device that is capable of generating the most fantastic images and scenarios in the mind of the reader. There’s a universe of images and ideas being actively created by the reader’s own mind, supported, I might add, by the very tangible medium of reflected light.

### **Everything you see is a reflection**

As humans, we have evolved to take in most of our world based on what we see, and most of what we see is reflected light. For most of our history – hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, the only sources of light we encountered were the sun, the stars, fire and lightning. Everything else was simply reflected light bouncing off the surfaces of everything around us.

Reading emails, documents, web pages and social media off a computer screen or a phone screen means staring into a light source, which our optic nerves, as well as the occipital lobe, the brain’s vision center, were not designed to do. This is why many people to this day prefer to print out their emails and read them on paper. They have discovered that they can retain more this way, by going back to words printed on a surface, seen in the form of reflected light.

So, in contrast to my description of a person reading a book, someone scrolling through their social media feed on their computer is a powerful opposite. There is no imagination with social media, nothing that the mind needs to generate, simply the passive act of receiving a stream of images that essentially hold the mind hostage, not allowing it to exercise its own thought patterns or think critically about what is being shown. There is an infinite number of videos in this feed, and they are all algorithmically selected to match your interests, not to challenge or expand them, and these combine with the altered mental state that reading from a light source generates, to create passive viewers who are not exercising their imaginations but instead reinforcing existing thoughts and ideas through a Skinnerian mutation of positive reinforcement.

Now in case you think this whole monologue is simply a version of “how much better things were back in my day,” it’s not. But there’s no question that new technologies are altering our mental processes in the same way that the highly refined foods that appeared in the 1950s and 1960s – white bread, lots of sugar, fat and salt, profoundly altered our physiologies our waistlines, and our physical and mental health.

It is eminently possible to replicate all of the healthy components that come from allowing the mind to process and expand the way it was designed to, and we can do it just as easily with new technologies, like video chat, except we don’t. The fact that so many people continue to turn off their screens when they join a video chat – a VIDEO chat – is testament to the fact we have not yet learned how to mature these technologies in a way that will connect with and then enhance our thinking and relational skills.

In short, people need to reconnect with the three-dimensional world around them, as well as with the people that inhabit that world, but as of yet, most have not realized how important that actually is, and might never learn this.

Here are a couple of related examples.

### **Let's go shopping at a big box store**

A growing number of big box retail stores in the U.S. and Canada have started to replace some of their self-checkouts with actual human cashiers. They have learned, through customer feedback, that many shoppers actually enjoy chatting with a cashier, if for just a couple of minutes. These are not just the older senior citizens who you might expect, but people of all ages, and I thought that was rather interesting.

The same thing applies in other retail environments as well. There are lots of customers, for example, who enjoy talking with a sales assistant, especially when that assistant has knowledge and wisdom to share. For example, Home Depot, recognized as the world's largest home improvement retailer, 50 knows that DIY customers – that means average people who want to do their own repairs and construction – make up around 60% of its sales, while professional contractors account for the other 40%. This means that most people go into the store not just to find a piece of hardware but also to learn which piece of hardware they actually need, along with advice on how to do the job better. These customers are not just coming to the store to buy a product; many of them are on a mission to learn something and to solve a problem at home. The advice, from an actual human employee with experience in the trades, makes a big difference, and inspires return visits.

These two retail examples highlight the importance that contact has in our lives. Not just about person-to-person contact, either. It's also about getting back in touch with the three-dimensional space around us – the one in which we all exist. We are, in a manner of speaking, space travelers.

So, going back to the video chats that I described at the start of this monologue – you know the ones where everyone has their cameras off – why is that?

Granted, some people don't have the bandwidth – their physical connection is not strong enough to support the high demands of streaming video. OK, that's certainly acceptable but think also of what that means to the participants of a video chat. It starts establishing the two solitudes of the digital "haves" and the "have nots." It starts to make people feel, well, remote, cut off from the main dynamics of any meeting.

But some are just not comfortable staring into a screen, and nor should they be. It's hard work. Our vision system was not designed to look at something at a fixed focal point for more than a few seconds. Even when you watch TV, your eyes will look around. They will seldom remain fixed on the TV. If you have experienced eyestrain headaches, you know that many hours spent essentially motionless in front of a computer cause pain to your eyes as well as your neck muscles. Your body was designed to move in space. Rigidity means pain. And it's also a light source, once again, a further cause of strain. In addition to that, the awareness of the fact you are on camera causes further distraction and energy drain simply in trying to be comfortable being watched. It's not natural to remain that hyper-aware of your visual self in the way that video demands.

So that's a lot of discomfort and effort being forced upon people who never even asked for video meetings in the first place; they were sprung upon an unsuspecting world during the COVID lockdown.

Since that time, the various makers of video chat technology have worked hard to refine their products to move away from the mosaic of faces, or worse, the collection of black squares representing cameras turned off that leave many feeling "this meeting could have been done over the phone or could have been an email."

### **The theatre of the meeting has been lost and it needs to be restored**

We exist, as living beings, in three dimensions. Four dimensions, actually, if you consider time, which you should. When that third dimension is taken away, a significant amount of the learning and engagement experience vanishes with it. It's like wanting to go to a concert put on by your favorite artist or band, but

the tickets are sold out and so instead you have to watch livestreamed video clips or even still pictures on your phone. It's just not the same.

For me, this was confirmed when I was attending a meeting online. But it wasn't your regular online meeting. It wasn't on Zoom or Teams or Webex. It was in the virtual world called Virbela. Virbela is a three-dimensional virtual campus situated on a virtual tropical island. To experience it, you do not need a bulky Meta headset, you can visit it on a regular computer screen. It's a place where people can walk to the nicely designed buildings on this island, sit down in meeting rooms, or in the auditorium, or take a walk along the beach to the pirate ship. Your avatar can walk, run, dance, do high-fives, wave, nod in agreement, applaud and many other actions. The easiest way to see what Virbela looks like is to just go to their website at [Virbela.com](http://Virbela.com) (spell out) and look at the animations. You will see the layout of the buildings, inside and out, where you are free to walk and talk and equally importantly look at the artwork, or the trees, or the ocean.

What I noticed, when I sat down and participated in a discussion in a big Virbela boardroom is how much of my comprehension and learning depended on NOT looking at the person speaking but instead looking around the room at more visually interesting things – the artwork on the walls, the plants and foliage, the beautiful tropical sky. Looking up and around like that helped the information sink in. I could hear more and learn more by looking elsewhere.

Existing in three dimensions is more important to people's daily lives than we allow ourselves to know, and this only becomes apparent when one of these dimensions is taken away. Think about video chat meetings again. Where do people look during a Zoom call? Basically at each other's images, or the PowerPoint presentation or the shared screen. We stare straight ahead. If you were to look away, to the side, or out the window, it might be interpreted as boredom or distraction. So we sit and we stare and we get very tired. Video chat technology may allow us to enjoy some form of contact with each other, but it doesn't give us contact with our world.

There are certainly many benefits to using video chat, the most obvious being the convenience of not having to travel. But the media itself seems to bring with it a sort of urgency of purpose. It does not seem to be a place where small talk or side chats are encouraged. There is a sterility to the environment largely brought about by the fact that we are held hostage by the camera.

When people have a conversation together in the same room, a large part of the interaction comes from the shared circumstance. Whether meeting in a coffee shop or at a desk in the office or best of all under a tree or on a beach, the conversation takes place in this shared space. We can look around, at artwork on the walls, out the window or at the landscape in front of us, and what we see becomes part of the conversation. It may even inspire new thoughts and ideas. Our minds embrace our circumstances as part of the conversation, part of the thought process. There's a flow that comes from dimensionality, just like staring at an aquarium, or even twirling the handset cord on a landline phone.

Think about when you shake hands with someone or hug a close friend. Think of the spatial references that go into that interaction, and the positive sensations that this form of physical contact with another person can bring. The sense of touch is an enormously influential one. It is a form of contact that unleashes endorphins in line with our instinctive desire for tribal connection, and it creates a sense of comfort that goes even further than words can.

To the degree that we must continue to rely on distance technologies to communicate it is important for organizations to teach people to take in their surroundings as a method of learning. We won't ever go back to a time when every meeting is held in an in-person meeting room. Some meetings should happen there, for sure, and that will be a good thing, but most will be online, and that means we should spend

some time getting used to video chat 2.0, in which an immersive environment becomes part of the experience.

It's still a good idea to make sure a meeting is engaging in terms of content. Even before the age of video chat there was no shortage of boring meetings – death by PowerPoint, and so on. The content and relevance of every meeting must still be planned out, but that is a topic for another episode.

For the moment my point is – if you can remember how difficult it was back in primary school to sit still, look straight ahead and listen to the teacher, it is just as difficult and as counterproductive for adults, and this is a shame, given that immersive environments are already available in applications like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, as well as premium products like Virbela.

Learning is an experience that requires space and dimension in order to take root in the mind and the body. There's no single point of focus. We twirled the landline handset cord because our body was an extension of our mind, and the need for physical activity as part of the process of communication and comprehension sized on the most convenient item within reach – the handset cord.

We still need this, we need three-dimensional space to move around in, especially when working on a challenging mental task, including talking on the phone. To learn we need to move, and the good news is all the tools we need to do this are right in front of us. We just have to start using them.

If you have a comment about this podcast or a suggestion of a topic you would like me to discuss, join the conversation on LinkedIn. My ID there is [stevenprentice](#). Or feel free to drop me a line through the contact form at [cooltimelife.com](http://cooltimelife.com), where you'll find a full listing of our evergreen CoolTimeLife episodes. If you feel you are getting value from this series, please leave a review, and tell just one person about us, or mention us on social media. And if you want, you can support us on Patreon. Contributions from our listeners allow me and my team to spend more time researching and preparing our podcast series. If that feels fair to you, please visit [patreon.com/steveprentice](http://patreon.com/steveprentice).

You can also visit this episode's dedicated page, [cooltimelife.com/Space](http://cooltimelife.com/Space)

Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping 'S' and a cursive 't'.