

PLATO Madison
Meeting OWL Equipment
for Hybrid Meetings
(Google Meet or Zoom)
8/20/2023

Assumptions:

- host* use of Windows or Mac laptop with USB and HDMI ports
- use of facility-owned Meeting OWL equipment **
- reliable internet connection and bandwidth
- HDMI output to in-room TV or projector
- adequate room lighting

Meeting OWL Device

To capture the full room, the Meeting OWL device will be connected to a laptop, probably the PLATO host's laptop. It provides a wide view of the room but also highlights active speakers (including the host), sharing their enlarged views. The format of these views depends on which Meeting OWL model is being used. Meeting OWL Pro doesn't track speakers as actively as Meeting OWL 3 but serves the same basic purpose.

The OWL serves as that laptop's webcam, microphone, and speakers.

The OWL would normally be positioned in the middle of a conference table, with participants sitting around the table or along one side. An alternative would be to have the OWL at the front of the room facing one or two rows of chairs, with participants not too far away, perhaps up to 10 or 15 feet from the OWL.

Some hosts would rely on that one laptop and OWL as the room's only active device, probably connected via HDMI to an in-room TV or projector.

Other active devices can be in the room but must have their microphones and speakers muted.

One can use multiple cameras in the room (one for each active device). For example, a separate device with internal webcam could be used to capture the host full-time so we weren't dependent on OWL tracking to re-acquire the host (the OWL would do that anyway, but we could look instead at the host's steady image).

We could also supplement the OWL views with a separate laptop capturing the full room with a stationary wide-angle webcam.

The OWL's audio performance is on par with expensive speakerphones. Its video performance is an acquired taste. Some participants will like it, some may dislike it, and it will take most of us some time to get used to it.

* 'host' refers to the person who sets up the Zoom or Google Meet event, who admits online attendees, and controls the administrative settings of the video conference. The host may or may not be the course coordinator.

** "Meeting OWL", by OWL Labs, is a leading brand line of all-in-one audio/video devices for teleconferencing.



What room size will this support?

As with stationary webcams and centrally placed speakerphones, the OWL device will not be satisfactory for a large meeting room. Audio and video performance require participants to be reasonably close, no more than perhaps 15 feet from the OWL.

Where are the Meeting OWLs?

OWL devices are expensive (~\$800 to \$1000). At this time, PLATO has classes at three OWL-equipped venues.

The SAIL organization (“Sharing Active Independent Lives”), housed at Oakwood West near the PLATO office, has an OWL 3 and is willing to let us borrow that for some classes at Oakwood West.

Bethany United Methodist Church, 3910 Mineral Point Rd, Madison, has an OWL Pro (the one that was used for our demonstration event in July) and is willing to let us borrow that for some classes.

Christ Presbyterian Church, 944 E Gorham St, Madison, also has an OWL and has allowed PLATO to use it for a course.

Other venues may have OWL devices too.

Do we expect to see more OWLs or similar devices?

There are more and more competing devices entering the market. Some are expensive, but others are below \$300. How well do they all work? We don't know. But it's safe to assume we'll see more of these adopted by some of PLATO's venues. It's not clear yet whether prices will drop to the level where coordinators might buy their own. We're certainly not there yet!

How would a coordinator access an OWL?

A coordinator would not access an OWL directly. The availability of the OWL would be confirmed by PLATO's Curriculum Committee as they secure a meeting room for your class (if the room and the OWL are available). Once the room is reserved, the coordinator would work with the facility to determine how the OWL would be made available each week.

What's a good class preparation strategy?

Coordinators will probably need to use their own laptop, mouse, and mousepad. Consider having a grab-and-go carrying bag to keep all additional equipment together that might be needed to assemble hybrid equipment. This might include an extra laptop power supply, speakerphone, a few USB cables, a USB extension cable, and two AC extension cords which can accommodate grounded or ungrounded plugs. Some laptops these days have very few ports, so they might also require a USB hub.