Video Conferencing: Pedagogical Strategies and Best Practices

WELCOME to the “Video Conferencing: Pedagogical Strategies & Best Practices” module! This module will walk you through the essential steps for developing and delivering your video conferencing courses. The module will offer “best practices” tips for working in front of a camera and will also offer suggestions for getting you and your students acclimated to a video conferencing, classroom environment.

WHAT VIDEO CONFERENCING HAS TO OFFER

Uniting People at a Distance
Video conferencing classrooms offer real-time, media-rich classes to students on and off the main university campus. Universities find this valuable because it allows one professor to be broadcast to multiple sites, at the same time, thereby reaching a greater student population.

Collaboration and Interaction Among Groups
Video conferencing unites students and faculty from different locations and provides an enriched environment for collaboration and discussion. Students and faculty can connect with peers from distant locations to engage in discussions, collaborate on projects and share experiences.

DESIGNING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Planning Your Course
Any course requires a well-organized course plan. It is especially important in video conferencing classrooms to have an organized course plan consisting of academic goals, course procedures and modes of communication. A quality course is also learner-centered, meaningful, and encourages activity, participation and construction of knowledge. When planning your course you should consider the following:

- Define the purpose of the course. What do you want to accomplish?
- Know your audience. Who are your students? What is their skill level? What is their motivation level?
- State your course objectives. What do you want to teach your students? What assignments, activities and readings will they do to achieve content mastery?
• **Choose your materials.** Choose course content. Post assignments, handouts, notes and supplemental materials on WebCT.

• **Outline the sequence and pace of your instruction.** Organize materials into a logical, sequential order and determine your time constraints.

• **Plan activities and projects.** Develop projects and activities that reinforce learning and promote collaboration and discussion. For example, plan an icebreaker activity for the first class and/or vary your class time with combinations of lecture, discussion and/or activities.

• **Develop the use of communication tools.** Connect personally with each student. Some available tools that allow you to communicate with your students include WebCT (email, discussion, chat and whiteboard) and video conferencing. It is important that online classes provide extensive student-to-student, student-to-professor and professor-to-student communication and collaboration. The online environment can leave students feeling isolated, disconnected and lonely if not established properly. See the “COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION” section below for more information.

• **Establish course procedures and policies.** Create specific procedures and rules for your course and make them clear to your students. Create an alternate plan in the event that technical problems occur or if a chat or discussion session is canceled.

• **Implement WebCT.** WebCT can aid in course preparation and management, content presentation, communication, information sharing, assessment, and grading. Set up your courses and give your students access before your course begins. This will give students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with WebCT. Provide instructions for log in and use.

• **Develop student assessments and course assessments.** Develop course assessments that measure your course objectives. Also, develop a simple formative evaluation tool for assessing student satisfaction, needs and suggestions for the course. Modify your class if needed from the students’ responses.

• **Develop a student orientation handout.** Develop a set of guidelines and instructions to acquaint students with the video conferencing technology, course procedures, policies and WebCT. Provide students with a troubleshooting plan that includes names and phone numbers for technical support.

• **Write a syllabus.** Post a syllabus on WebCT. In addition to the academic portion of your syllabus, you should also include a section detailing specific course procedures and policies. You may want to include the following:
  - Emergency procedures for students to follow in the event of technology failure, emergencies, inclement weather or illness.
  - Specific days and times for email correspondence and discussions.
YOUR COURSE IN ACTION

Getting to Know Your Students
It is very important for you to make a visit to your remote students. This will help students to connect with you and the class. Use WebCT’s communication tools to post an introduction of yourself and request that the students also post introductions. The students will use your post as a model for their own. As the students post their introductions be certain to respond to each of them.

Starting the first video conferencing session with an icebreaker activity will also help the class get acquainted. Have each student at the local and remote sites give a short introduction. Have them state their name, their degree program and something personal that they would like to share with the class (family, children, job, favorite local restaurant, favorite hobby or activity). The icebreaker activity will also allow students to become comfortable using the video conferencing equipment and speaking in front of a camera.

Communication and Collaboration
It is important to connect personally with each student. Some available tools that allow you to communicate with your students include WebCT (email, discussion, chat and whiteboard). Plan interactions to engage your students. There are two types of communication that can be used to enhance your class. They include asynchronous and synchronous communication.

- **Asynchronous communication** includes tools such as discussions, whiteboards and email. Asynchronous communication involves one-to-many or one-to-one communication. In one-to-many, one person posts a message that is read and responded to by the entire group, such as in discussion and white board activities. Email is an example of a one-to-one communication. Asynchronous communication allows students time to reflect on a question or topic before posting a response.
- **Synchronous communication** involves two users or many users interacting at the same time such as with chat sessions, discussions and white boards. Students have a tendency to stray off-task in chat/discussion/whiteboard sessions therefore it is important to establish class expectations, rules, structured activities and moderation of the discussions. Since this mode of communication occurs in “real-time” students do not have the same opportunity as in asynchronous communication to think thoroughly before responding to a discussion. It is therefore advisable to prepare students in advance with specific questions or content.
• **Tips for integrating communication into your course:**
  - Make contact with each student. You may consider sending a personal email to each student introducing yourself at the beginning of the semester.
  - Develop communication and familiarity among your students. You may consider pairing students into small study groups. Within these study groups you can plan an email, a discussion or a chat activity. This will also serve to provide students with an academic peer support group.
  - Write clear expectations and prepare a focused topic for all communication sessions.
  - Design high-level questions that are specific to your content and are thought provoking.
  - Post one main question per message or discussion session to create a dialogue. Asking too many questions within one message or discussion can create a monologue.
  - Discuss online etiquette such as treating others with respect, no harsh language and keeping conversations relevant to the content topic.
  - Consider making communication a mandatory component of the course with grading reinforcements.
  - Monitor all communication.

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**BEST PRACTICES ON-CAMERA**

**Eye Contact**
Make eye contact with your students when you are speaking to them and when they are speaking to you. When speaking to your remote students speak into the camera. Making eye contact with the camera it will appear to your remote students as if you are making eye contact with them. You may look at other students while you are speaking however do not let your eyes look beyond the scope of the camera. For example, you do not want to let your eyes wonder out a window or into a hallway. This causes your remote students to feel disconnected from what they cannot see.

**Speak Audibly**
Speak in a clear, audible voice. You do not need to speak loudly in order for the microphone to pick up your voice. Avoid using a monotone voice. If you speak too softly, you will not be heard. If you speak too loudly, you will sound as if you are shouting at your students.
Movement
Make slow, smooth movements; avoid rapid motion.
Be aware of the visual range of your camera. Do not walk outside of the camera’s range or the remote class will not see you.
Minimize distractions; avoid things such as tapping or clicking a pen, fixing your hair or clothing in the camera’s view.
Relax in order to avoid stiff and rigid teaching.

Clothing
Clothing and accessories play an important role in the visual effect you display on camera. The wrong choice of clothing or accessories can cause visual distortions, glare and bright reflections. This can be very distracting to students.
- What works best on camera
  - Solid clothing in dark or neutral colors
  - Blue
- What to avoid on camera
  - Plaid, stripes and busy patterns
  - White, pastels
  - Clothing or accessories that dangle, sparkle or flash.

Eliminate Background Noise
Background noise can be a great distracter to the video conferencing class.
Avoid external noise such as rattling keys, ringing cell phones, side conversations, papers rattling near microphones and doors opening and closing.

Show Interest in Both Participant Groups
It is important to treat both local and remote groups of students equally, giving each equal attention. It is more difficult to capture the attention of the remote group because they must connect with you through a screen. However, do not try to overcompensate by focusing too much attention on the remote group or you will lose the attention of the local group.

Extras
Do not provide food, drinks, handouts or hands-on displays to one group of students without providing it to the other group.
IDEAS FOR MANAGING YOUR TIME

- Use discussion boards as often as possible for Q&A sessions. Have students post questions to the discussion board. This will allow all students to benefit from the questions and your answers.
- Keep a database or document containing common questions and answers. In future courses you may be able to use this to post a FAQ page.
- Technology operates twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. However, you are not on call at every minute to attend to questions. Set policies and notify students of specific days and times that you will be responding to discussions or emails.
- Try to have your course prepared and materials posted to WebCT before the course begins. This will free you during the semester to devote your attention to your students and not towards developing the course.

REFERENCES

The Academic Technology Center at Cornell University  
http://www.cit.cornell.edu/atc/materials/vtc/

AT&T Knowledge ventures  
http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/vidconf/intro.html

Innovations in Distance Education  
http://www.outreach.psu.edu/de/ide/GP&P/GP&P.html

Penn State Royer Center for Learning and Academic Technologies  
https://royercenter.cwc.psu.edu/Faculty/video/guide.aspx

GREAT RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS

University of West Florida Online Campus  
Tips for Effective Online Learning  
http://onlinecampus.uwf.edu/Class/learning.htm