

SECTION B:

Preparation for a Video Conference and the Conference Itself

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It is essential to plan ahead for a video conference. It can be difficult to arrange regular synchronous communications between classes in two or more schools, so the further ahead you are able to plan the better. This section deals with issues that need to be addressed before and during a video conference.

Knowing Your System

It is important that users feel comfortable using the video conferencing system. Look for training opportunities offered by vendors or your LEA. Arrange for training sessions in school for colleagues. Prepare a 'Quick Start' guide for colleagues who may have been unable to attend the training or who might need a reminder.

Ensure that, if your system is disconnected and stored between use, users can reconnect it. Draw a diagram and label cables and connections. Check that batteries are in remote controls and that spare batteries are available.

Take the time to practise by connecting to a 'friendly' far-end, or an automated remote site, to help you to develop the necessary basic skills and confidence that will help ensure your video conference is successful. Most vendors will act as a far-end or at least provide you with the number of a remote video conferencing system to dial.

Global Leap also offers this service, by arrangement. See www.global-leap.com for details.

Ensure that users can:

- Set up the system
- Plug in the ISDN, IP line
- Switch the system on!
- Make a call
- Control the camera
- Mute the sound when necessary
- Check the picture you are sending to the far-end using picture-in-picture
- Plug in a video cassette player or camcorder to play in pre-recorded video
- Plug in a camcorder to act as a second camera
- Plug in a video cassette recorder to record a video conference

As well as building technical skills, it is important for users to feel confident in front of a video conferencing system. Take the time to experiment so that users are comfortable in front of the camera. Let pupils get over the initial novelty of being in front of the camera and have the opportunity to ask all their questions about the technology and how it works!

Before a Conference

Making arrangements with your partner:

- Decide on a date and time for the video conference.
It may be difficult to find a mutually convenient time for the link. School timetables will be different, rooms and equipment may not be available when you want them. Engage support from your head teacher, senior management team, technician and other staff. Supportive and enthusiastic colleagues who value video conferencing in the classroom can help overcome some of these problems.
- Ensure all dates, times, mobile phone numbers, contact names and ISDN numbers are exchanged in good time and checked. Use e-mail to confirm arrangements in writing to avoid any errors. Remember that May 4th 2002 may be written as 4/5/02 or 5/4/02 depending upon where the date originated. Write the date in full. Acknowledge the receipt of the information as additional confirmation.

Important note about mobile phones: Do not rely on your video conference system being the only means of communication in your video conference classroom. It is good practice to ensure that both sites have access to a mobile telephone, or other 'fixed' telephone, in the room for those occasions when instant troubleshooting and diagnosis are necessary. Both sites need to know the number of the phone in the room at the other site. This is the one time when it is acceptable, even essential, for one identified person to have their mobile phone switched on during the video conference event. A phone at the other end of the corridor is not much help. If a minor technical problem should occur, which can be easily solved, it is very frustrating not to be able to contact the person at the other end to explain what has happened and advise what action can be taken. Much valuable time can be wasted as a result.

- Check school holiday dates in other regions and countries. Across the UK holidays vary from region to region. Remember, in the southern hemisphere summer is between December and January. In France and Germany school exams begin in May, with the effect that lessons for some pupils do not resume until September.
- If you are working with a partner in a different time zone outside the UK:
Check time differences - Across the USA there are three time zones (New York is EST, Houston is CDT, California is PST). Australian States also operate different time zones. If you work with GMT as your standard, colleagues can + or - to their particular region. GMT is a good standard but remember that BST is GMT+1. Find a website with time zones and a meeting planner to double check.
www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/
Remember, planning a conference for 2.00 pm in the UK will mean a presenter in California will have to conference at 6.00 am.

Some schools in Europe often begin earlier and finish at lunchtime. Be prepared to hold lunchtime and twilight sessions or to change your timetable.

Be flexible - meet at a convenient time for you on one occasion and an inconvenient time on another. You will find people can be exceptionally accommodating. At the Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia, a colleague even arranged a sleepover event to enable them to take part in a video conference link to the UK.

- Check the age of the pupils and the size of the group you are linking with. In practice, perfect matches are rare and sometimes different age groups and abilities can work well together.
- If possible, meet your link teacher/colleague informally, over a video conference, before conferencing with the children/students.
- If you are working with an 'expert' from a museum or education centre, discuss in advance the age and level of the group you are going to working with and the form at you wish the lesson to take. Exchange any relevant materials and information in advance to facilitate the smooth running of the session. If your presenter has a list of questions in advance, the artefacts s/he shows are more likely to match the interests of the pupils.
- Exchange seating plans, pupil names, questions and other information that will help your conference run smoothly.

Preparing the Pupils/Students

- A group of pupils will naturally be excited and curious about their first video conference. They will want to talk about how it works, experiment and ask questions. It is worth providing an opportunity for them to try out the technology informally prior to the event. Then the pupils will be ready to concentrate on the lesson content.

During a recent link to NASA and a presentation about globes, maps and the International Space Station, all the pupils really wanted to know was *"How does the link work?"* *"Where is NASA?"* *"What's the time difference?"* and various questions about cultural issues. The presenter answered all the questions in an informal and entertaining way; the children were happy and settled down to the more serious business of the conference.

- Practise your group's presentation. You can look at it on an additional monitor or record it on a VCR to check that it can be seen and heard and to help work on stylistic improvements. It is also useful to practice your presentation with a 'sympathetic' far-end. Pupils soon become aware of the importance of how they look and sound and will swiftly develop the skills required for successful video conferencing.

Preparing the Room and Equipment

- Video conferencing is about seeing and hearing. A poor picture can make communication difficult; without sound, your video conference cannot take place at all. It is therefore essential to test your connection before your conference begins. Check the type of system being used at the far-end and arrange an informal test. Technical difficulties can usually be sorted out and adjustments to the physical environment can also be addressed.
- If you are planning to use additional technology such as a camcorder, document camera or laptop, as part of the conference, practise using it beforehand.
- Give some thought to arrangements in the room. Plan where your contributors will sit so that movement does not disrupt the flow of the event. Your video conference partners will be more interested in seeing you than your furniture.
- Give some thought to camera shots that you will use during the conference. If you will not be controlling the camera yourself, brief the person who will be.

Interaction is the Name on the Game!

The beauty of video conferencing is that it is interactive. If your educational goals are only 'content', you might decide to use a video recording. Thousands of dollars have been spent producing video recordings on any subject you can imagine. Video conference providers cannot compete with this for sheer content and graphic interest. However, if you want your students to be actively engaged, asking questions and participating in the content, then video conferencing is the next best thing to being there!

In order to maximise this interaction the teacher and provider really have to be a team and the student to teacher ratio has to be small. The more information I have from a teacher about their students' knowledge and interests the better! The best programmes have resulted from small classes where the teacher has sent me a seating chart, a description of the work the students have been doing and some questions the students have on the topic being covered.

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During a Conference

- Take the time to introduce yourselves to the far-end.
- If the video or audio connection is poor at the start of your conference, it is better to say so early on in the event rather than politely struggle along getting increasingly frustrated. It may be that simple adjustments to lighting and microphone positions are the solution. This is why testing in the early stages is so important and worthwhile. Sometimes hanging up and redialling or rebooting the system will solve a poor connection.
- Correct etiquette cannot be over-emphasised. That which is considered good manners in the classroom is also good etiquette during a video conference.
- **WHAT ARE THEY HEARING THE OTHER END?**
It is important to speak slowly, deliberately and clearly. Remember that strong regional accents may cause problems for far-end participants, so 'slow down'.
- **WHAT ARE THEY SEEING THE OTHER END?**
Use your camera controls to adjust the image you transmit during the video conference. Sitting at a table is often a conference choice, but don't sit too far from the camera. The people at the other end of the conference want to see who they're talking to, not a silhouetted solitary figure at the farthest end of a very long table. When in close up, ensure you are presenting head and shoulder shots - not the top of the head, chin, chest or the back of the head!

When a discussion is taking place with a number of speakers, it is helpful to have a camcorder attached to the video conference system. The camera operator can use the camcorder for the close up shots of speakers and the fixed camera for the group shots, cutting between the two as necessary using the remote control. This cuts out the camera movement there would have to be if only the fixed camera was being used, and the consequent 'break-up' of sound this sometimes causes. But it does require someone who can operate a camera and knows how and when to switch between cameras.

- The whole purpose of video conferencing is to interact. If you want to interrupt or pose an additional question, take the opportunity to do so.
- Remember, when you are video conferencing, even when there are a number of other participants, you can be seen at any time!
- If possible, consider having a second monitor in the room beside the video conference monitor. The pupils can see themselves on the second monitor and be aware how they are presenting themselves.

In one conference, a school forgot that they could be seen and, after their contribution, they took the time to break for lunch while another school was giving their presentation. This particular piece of bad manners reflected badly on the students taking part. While you are connected to the conference you should behave as if you are in the same room as your colleagues, even though you might be miles apart.

- Pupils need to listen to any questions they might be asked. On one occasion, the question asked by the presenter was repeated by the teacher in the class, answered by a pupil and relayed by the teacher back to the presenter. This seemed a complete waste of valuable time. If the pupils had been trained to listen and respond directly to the far-end this could have been avoided. Remember this is interactive video conferencing.
- To help remote learners participate and feel included, relate directly to them by looking directly into the video camera. This will help all users feel included and not just passive viewers.
- Too much background movement, hand waving and fidgeting will only distract and cause the picture to blur. A quick demonstration or practice during an informal session can help keep movement to a minimum.
- Avoid talking over each other. Wait for a moment before responding.
- Always mute the microphone when you are not talking.

On one occasion involving four schools in a multipoint link, an 'open' mike ruined the conference as the camera repeatedly jumped to a noisy site. This situation was compounded by the constant feedback, which drowned out the sound of the presenter. Remember to make appropriate use of your mute button to avoid these problems and test your audio beforehand.

- Maintain enthusiasm. It is important when video conferencing to ensure that all participants are engaged. Make regular use of interaction and perhaps break down a long conference into a number of short conferences with breaks.
- When you become fully involved in a discussion or presentation, you begin to feel the people you are talking to are with you in your classroom. If you subsequently meet them face to face, you will find you are quite comfortable and at ease because you have in fact already 'met' each other!

A lot of this may seem obvious, but most people involved in video conferencing will have a story about arriving for a conference unprepared, with the equipment still in the box, remote controls without batteries, pupils arriving late, wrong phone numbers and so on. So many of the problems people experience are due to simple human errors which could easily have been avoided.

With preparation and practice, video conferencing becomes a very exciting classroom resource. Without them, teachers can become frustrated and critical of yet another piece of technology.