

4.

Video conferencing in English

Schools Involved:

South Molton Community College
Sidmouth Community College

Background: The video conference system is sited at one end of a large English Teaching room where it is connected all the time. In front of the TV there is an open area where students can sit whilst a class can remain at their work in the other part of the room. The siting of the system here has proved a huge advantage both to me and to the art teacher, who has made use of it because time is precious and if the unit simply needs switching on one is more likely to use it. Furthermore, pupils not directly involved in a link have learned about the process and have watched and listened; since we were focusing on the media during the Autumn term the unit stimulated energetic discussion of possible applications in Education. Year 9 was studying the 'fly on the wall' documentary, and 'Big Brother' in particular, so the presence in the room of a camera was interesting. I switched the system on for the lessons and, though we were not involved in a dialogue, we were able to observe how people behaved differently when a camera was on. There were 31 cameras in the 'Big Brother' house!

The pupils in one Year 8 class who witnessed several conferences were soon able to continue with their own work whilst a link was in progress, though they always waved goodbye! Frustrations began when I started to explore the possibilities of linking with other schools. The timing of the school day made it difficult to link up smoothly and any link involves several phone calls, e-mails, faxes and even snail mail. There was a curious irony in a project involving communication when we found ourselves using my mobile in the classroom to contact Tim Arnold or Martin Phillips, DCS advisers, in order to set up a link. Despite the frustrations an arrangement was made with Sidmouth College.

Curriculum Context: Key Stage 4 English

Research and Planning

I had been working on the power of rhetoric and speech making with Year 10 students, who wanted to deliver their speeches to a new audience. A date was set for a video conference with a group of Year 10 students at Sidmouth Community Collrge. My students had to be released from another lesson and I had a non-contact period, so, again, this had to be carefully organised.

The Video Conferences

Session 1: The link was successfully made, which caused great excitement among the 12 students assembled and each student introduced her/himself in turn to the group in Sidmouth, also Year 10 pupils. We were arranged in a small semi-circle in front of the screen and when a student was delivering her/his speech, s/he stood up.

We had discussed the two-way process of speech making but it was difficult to respond to this audience because their response was slightly delayed, by which time the speaker had progressed to the next point. Though we had allowed for this in the preparation, each audience is different, and the responses were unpredictable; they exclaimed, gasped or laughed spontaneously. One speaker, in particular, experienced problems as laughter is accompanied by movement and this became distracting, though she continued doggedly to deliver her speech with dignified eloquence. Feedback was offered following each speech, which was much appreciated by the speakers and offered me an opportunity to assess my students' ability to engage with their audience and develop points raised. We concluded the session with an informal chat and a visual exploration of our respective classrooms, the view from our windows and the exciting drama of the arrival of the school bus.

Evaluation: The experience was both exhilarating and exhausting. Having signed off, we discussed how it had felt and I was interested to hear the pupils' perceptions. They too had found it a strangely dislocated experience, perhaps due to the nature of the task. We all agreed that the pace of talk is crucial, of the need for adequate pauses between complex points and for the audience to ascertain that the speaker has finished. From my perspective, this discussion was very important because the students had recognised the need for discourse markers and we discussed their use in talk generally. This was later relayed to the whole group of 31 students by those involved.

I had a follow up 'phone conversation with Roland, the English teacher at Sidmouth, and we decided to suggest that students make it quite clear when their talk was finished and what feedback was expected to allow for the very slight time delay. A second link was agreed and we organised releasing students, etc. It is this organisation which is the hardest part of the process and I wish there was some way to avoid it.

Session 2: The second conference was held a week after the first. This time pupils read extracts from their coursework for Original Writing and responded to each other's work. All the examples were of a high standard and students were suitably impressed. We were more accomplished conference participants, able to adapt pace, allow for audience response and anticipate it. I noticed too that vocal inflexion becomes slightly more marked as speakers tried to engage their audience and lead them through a piece. Again, this encouraged further discussion of discourse markers.

Evaluation: After the session, pupils felt satisfied that this conference was valuable, felt proud of the work they'd read, which had been appreciated, and were interested in the work produced by the Sidmouth students. We discussed the possibility of further work on our own personal writing. Students at South Molton stage-managed each conference and one student in particular, Katherine Glover, deserves praise for her persistent pursuit of a link! She gained an understanding of the technical processes involved and was able to set up equipment for our art links, involving the screening of video. I believe students should be involved in the whole process and the Year 10 group has had several suggestions for valuable links. The only thing which prevents us from pursuing them is time.

Session 3: A video conference link was established with the Anne Frank House in order to prepare pupils for an art trip to Amsterdam, which took place in February 2002. The students were drawn from across the school, Years 9-11, which meant it was difficult to gather them together during the school day to discuss ideas. Four of the pupils were in my Year 9 English group and we had studied the play of Anne Frank's story and considered extracts from the diary. We had worked on ideas for staging the play and written monologues. Some of this work was taken to the House.

A key part of our preparation was the video conference we had with the education officer in Amsterdam in January 2002. We were 'shown around' the large room where our students would spend time as part of their visit. We then discussed the type of pupil groupings which would be most effective when working on various aspects of the diary. This was particularly important as some pupils had not read the diary at that stage.

Future Possibilities

I would like to explore the possibility of continuing the link with the Anne Frank House as it will mean so much more after the visit. For example, some of the art work which has been produced could be exhibited and pupils could read work they had written. Perhaps pupils who did not participate in the visit could make a link and read some of their work 'live', since this will give them an opportunity to reach a wider audience.

This is where I believe the true potential of video conferencing lies, since a live audience can prove inspirational, and encourages pupils to value their work and consider the notion of audience whilst they are writing. Usually this audience consists solely of the teacher and their peers but other audiences can offer a new dimension and critical focus. I am in the process of organising this. I am currently investigating a link with a Bradford school to enable Key Stage 4 students to discuss the anthology of stories and poetry they are studying for GCSE. I want the students to read a poem from the section 'Poetry from other Cultures and Traditions' and discuss ideas with the students from Bradford, with no input from the teacher, so their response is fresh and original.

One of the exam board's criticisms of students' responses to literature is that they often rely on what the teacher has told them without feeling able to express their own ideas, so markers are presented with almost identical scripts. This way, the students rely on their own resources, with the additional exchange of ideas with students who live in a very different environment. My students are accustomed to life in rural Devon and may gain insights from Bradford students which can open up new perspectives. Equally, the Devon students have different perceptions to share.

The setting up of the link continues to frustrate all concerned. Even making 'phone calls is difficult, since our breaks do not coincide and we are inevitably driven to contacting each other at home.

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