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Post-16 courses via video conferencing, using an external provider

School Involved:

The King's School, Ottery St Mary, Devon

External Provider: Moorhouse Black

Background

It's a rainy Monday in late January; the time is 8.30 am; the place is the Deputy Head's office - the telephone rings. It can only be bad news - it always is at this time on a Monday. Sure enough, Mrs F will not be in today; not remarkable in itself, but the bombshell - nor will she be in for the next month or maybe longer! Autopilot takes over and the well-oiled cover system, present within every school in the land, swings into place.

It's now **10.50 am**, it's still raining, the implications of the nettle still have to be grasped and some solutions need to be offered. The sticking point - Mrs F teaches post-16 Sociology for nearly 50 per cent of her time - where will her replacement be found?... It's **11.30 am**, it's raining even harder and the atmosphere is heavy with reflection on how this position has been reached:

- 6th Form student numbers were dropping
- We needed more breadth in our post-16 provision
- Students keep requesting the 'ologies' - psychology and sociology
- The local FE college was offering 'everything' the students wanted
- The budget was getting tighter
- Mrs F was a known quantity and was able to teach post-16 sociology

The solution is obvious - contact the LEA Supply office and have them interrogate the supply list for a sociology teacher... It's **2.30 pm** - does it ever stop raining? The supply office has phoned back - do we want the good news or the bad news? The good news - they have located a teacher of Sociology, the only one on their register; the bad news - he lives over sixty miles away and will expect travelling expenses... It's **3.00 pm**, travelling expenses have been agreed and a solution is in place... It's **4.00 pm** and the thought is "Is this worth the massive effort underlying the cover of less than a handful of students?" The answer is a resounding yes, but let's begin to look laterally for the future. And this is how our involvement with video conferencing began although distance learning had been previously discussed.

The Video Conferencing

Having decided to adopt the video conferencing approach, I would offer the following 'school report'.

The school initially subscribed to two courses: A level sociology and A level psychology provided by 21st Advanced Options, now Moorhouse-Black. As this was a new approach within the school we started with well-motivated students who had shown good study skills - four students in sociology, seven students in psychology.

The hardest part for the school staff was to come to terms with the fact that each subject received only one-hour tutor tuition per week. However, because the support materials were well thought out, the students did not find this a problem.

In order to make distance learning a positive experience, the school converted a small room into the video conferencing area. This was furnished with seating that had flip-over work areas and students had access to the room via a swipe-card. Within this area we installed a dedicated video conferencing system.

Apart from close liaison with the provider on agreeing times of delivery, timetabling of one hour sessions was relatively easy to achieve. In general, the students are responsible for getting to the video conferencing room on time, gaining access and logging on ready for a prompt start. When technical problems have arisen, the ICT technician has been called upon but, in two years, this remains in single figures. Once the session starts, and because the students believe the camera is always focused on them, they concentrate on the task in hand and exercise very sound self-discipline.

As time has progressed and more students have begun video conferencing, we have expanded our provision to A level law (three students), GCSE Latin (10 students) as well as running A/S sociology (three students) and A/S psychology (14 students). Extra internal support has been provided through an assistant headteacher who oversees, mentors and advises with tutor session access for students to discuss any 'subject' queries. These queries tend to relate to building confidence rather than subject knowledge.

Unlike normal classroom dynamics, video conferencing does not allow the normal tutor/student relationship to develop. It is very difficult to physically get alongside a student, have a quiet word, look over their shoulder, etc. so different techniques have to be employed. However, a half-day visit by the tutor each term helps establish the person rather than just their screen image. Where tutor/class relationships seem a problem, we have approached the provider and consequently successful modifications of approach have been made. In an extreme case the tutor was replaced. All in all, the tutor/student relationship has been very strong.

The tutors delivering the sessions are also aware of this lack of normal dynamics and develop strategies to bring this dimension in other ways. In order to develop the relationship and to enable questions/queries to be addressed, regular e-mail interchanges between the students and the tutor take place.

Our first set of results is now in, with all students achieving or improving on their predicted grades.

Students' Opinions

We sent questionnaires to 12 King's School students who have been involved in a video conference course. Here are some of their responses:

- The majority of the students felt the sessions were interactive and said that they were able to ask questions when they needed to.
- The majority of the students said that, although they were able to contact the tutor via e-mail, there was minimal contact outside tutorials.
- 11 of the students said that the face-to-face meeting with the tutor was important.
- When asked if they had any advice for students considering taking a course delivered by video conferencing, 9 of the 12 stressed the fact that you have to be well-disciplined and prepared to work independently.
- The most detailed response was to the question 'What are the advantages and disadvantages of video conferencing?'

Advantages

"Gets you into a different way of learning."

"You can get on with your work at home."

"The classes are smaller."

"More free periods."

"Teacher doesn't have to be here."

"One lesson a week - not as pressured."

"Do units in your own time."

"Students support each other more."

"More independence."

"Lots of home study."

"Good practice for individual study needed at university."

Disadvantages

"People think they can get away with messing around so they disrupt the lesson more."

"Need self discipline to do the work."

"Need to be motivated to complete the work independently."

"If you don't understand your work it's hard to find the right answer."

"Only one lesson a week."

"Can't show work, you have to send it off. Takes longer."

"Left to do a lot by yourself, so a lot of room for error without realising."

"Can easily get away without doing any work."

"When you get stuck on the homework, you have to wait a week to get help."

"Not such a good interaction with the teacher - don't know each other as well as teachers you see every day."

"Weird, less personal; don't feel as confident talking."

"It's easier to lose concentration."

School Targets and the Future

Having firmly established the role of video conferencing as a way of achieving breadth in the school's Post-16 provision, the school will now ensure a regular tutor/mentoring session for half an hour every two weeks with the students to monitor progress, ensure work is done and be aware of levels of achievement. In addition, this will allay any fears and anxieties that students (and parents) may have.

Being convinced of the usefulness and effectiveness of this approach, further expansion will be explored, possibly through joint provision with other institutions. The establishment of a broadband connection within the school will support this.

Within the normal mentoring of students concerning their Post-16 option choices, the school must be sure that students wishing to follow a video conferencing course are able to sustain a regime of self study. This style of learning is not for all.

Colin Manser, Deputy Head, The King's School, Ottery St Mary

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Link with Public Record Office, London

School Involved:

Sidmouth Community College, Devon

Background: The Year 7 class taking part in the video conference session had been studying British history 1066-1500. The pupils knew about the Domesday Book within an overview of how William 1 established control over his new kingdom but had not yet done detailed work on village life or on how the Domesday Book was compiled.

Curriculum Context: Key Stage 3 history

Aims of Video Conferencing Session

The primary aim established after consultation between Sidmouth College and the Public Record Office was to help pupils to deepen their understanding of how the Domesday Book was compiled and how the process affected Saxon perceptions of their new Norman rulers.

A further aim was to introduce pupils to some of the issues around the survival and safe keeping of historical documents such as the Domesday Book.