

SECTION H:

The Future

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Videoconferencing and e-Learning

'E-Learning is improving the quality of learning through using interactive computers, online communications, and information systems in ways that other teaching methods cannot match.' (Towards a unified e-Learning strategy DfES July 2003)

It is clear that video conferencing sits firmly within the field of e-Learning. It is one of a range of ICT tools and as such it will increasingly benefit from being used along with other collaborative tools such as forums, application and file sharing and email. But these tools have to meet the needs of the teacher in the classroom by being easy to use, reliable and flexible.

At a practical level teachers and students will need tools that enable them to better manage use of video conferencing systems. This will increase their potential use in a number of ways:

- Teachers and students will be able to video conference when and where they need to. Older students, for example, already manage their own use of video conferencing for distance learning.
- Security and protection for the individual are vital. Increasingly the integration of video conferencing into authentication systems such as portals will provide protection whilst giving freedom of use within necessary boundaries.
- The ability to schedule calls and book resources, particularly for multipoint calls, will also be important if the teacher is going to be able to better plan for using video conferencing during a lesson.
- With the increase in access to broadband in the home it will be possible to provide a managed video conferencing service to students, providing greater flexibility for them to choose when and where they access support for learning.
- With the greater flexibility that is already developing around the school day it may be more convenient for students and teachers to communicate at times using video conferencing.
- Video conferencing can be used to support students who are not in school, for example students in hospital schools could participate in a lesson at their school from the hospital.
- New mobile technologies, including mobile phones, make it possible to conference from a wide range of locations, opening up the possibility of conferencing with teachers, experts or students 'in the field'.
- The integration of video conferencing with other technologies such as video streaming and chat has already widened the reach of some conferences whilst still providing an element of interaction. As schools move to the IP environment for video conferencing the potential for combining the use of different technologies will increase.

So what about the impact on teaching and learning?

'After years of disembodied voices emerging from cassette recorders, devoid of interest, context, and any para-linguistic clues which aid understanding, now they have 'real' children who laugh and wave, look nervous and stumble the same as themselves. Suddenly there is a reason to communicate.'

MFL Teacher - Middle School

'Put simply, when children use video conferencing they discover language. It suddenly makes sense.'

Headteacher - French link primary school

'Through the use of video conferencing technology, the curiosity of both sets of pupils had been aroused and productively used to improve their learning.'

Head of Geography - Secondary school working with a Year 7 group

'The children . . . were inspired to write letters, cards and invitations and to draw maps, plans and diagrams. Children are still talking about it over six months later.'

Headteacher - Primary school following activities with reception children

It is clear from schools we have worked with on the 'Video Conferencing in the Classroom Project' that video conferencing has a significant impact on the motivation of students of all ages and that teachers are in no doubt that this has had an impact on their learning.

It goes beyond the novelty effect. Students quickly appreciate if a new technology offers them anything, and the experience in schools suggests they do see that video conferencing can add to the learning experience. This is evidenced by the fact that, in many cases, students are keen to initiate, plan and manage conferences themselves. After all, many students will have video communications on their mobile phones and they will be at ease with communicating in this way, so let's continue to demonstrate and encourage its use for learning as well as entertainment.

More work needs to be done to evaluate issues such as impact on teaching and learning styles, where videoconferencing is most effective, and classroom management. However, as with all technologies or e-Learning tools, it is the skill of the teacher that is the most important factor in its success.

We hope that this book demonstrates the huge potential of videoconferencing as a tool to support teaching and learning in the classroom and beyond.