



CENTER FOR INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING (CITL)

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VIDEOCONFERENCING BEST PRACTICES & TIPS FOR INSTRUCTORS

Make course materials available.

Post assignments, handouts, notes and supplemental materials on your classes and give access to students before the course begins. This will give students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with materials and the other students. Include agenda, syllabus, presentations, reading list, guide lines for videoconference etiquette, ground rules, policies for attendance/makeup work/advisement times, contacts, phone numbers, emails, and any other necessary information or material relevant to all participating sites. Consider sending a personal email to each student introducing yourself at the beginning of the semester.

Develop the use of communication and collaboration tools.

The distributed environment can cause students to feel isolated and disconnected by the physical distance separating them. To counter this, it is important to connect with each student to keep them interested and involved. Classes with remote locations should plan and provide for student-to-student, student-to-professor and professor-to-student communication and collaboration.

Plan how you will connect – the type of activity and what technology you will use. In addition to video conferenced classes, consider email, chat, discussion boards, telephone or one-to-one video.

Plan activities and projects.

Videoconferencing is by definition, interactive / designed to bridge the gap of the distributed environment. Develop projects and activities that promote collaboration and discussion across and between the remote and local locations. For example, plan an icebreaker activity for the first class and be sure to devote class time to a combination of lecture, discussion and/or activities. The more you can encourage interaction the better. Examples of strategies and activities you can incorporate include:

- Student projects - Consider team projects or assignments involving students across the sites
- Presentations - Design research and reporting / presentations that capitalize on the different local experiences of students at different sites
- Discussions, debates, skits and role-playing, brainstorming and group problem-solving.
- Design group activities to involve students across the sites

Another advantage of videoconferencing is that it supports diverse materials and media. Consider creative use of PowerPoint and other standard programs, video and Internet resources.

Be aware of both the possibilities and limitations of video conferencing.

Not all video conference rooms and systems are the same so make sure you fully understand what the system can do. Going into a room without understanding the equipment can be discomfiting. Become familiar with the equipment in advance to help you be more comfortable and enable you to make adjustments if / as needed.

Practice

An effective class depends on good delivery. Rehearse in front of the camera if possible. It is also helpful to be familiar with the layout of the room, so at least one rehearsal should be in the room you will be using. Make sure you are comfortable with your surroundings and you understand the equipment being used. Don't read directly off of your slides, handouts, etc. Be natural.

Develop student assessments and course assessments.

Develop a simple evaluation tool for assessing student satisfaction, with the course delivery method and suggestions for the course. You will be able to modify your course structure and delivery if needed from the students' responses.

IN THE CLASSROOM

A videoconference class is probably a new experience for everyone. Students may be unsure of how to act and feel uncomfortable in front of the camera. In addition, remote students may feel like they are watching television and lapse into a passive mode. It is important to have strategies for engaging students, putting them at ease, facilitating discussion and making everyone feel a part of the class.

A. What to expect on your first day

- In most cases the remote sites will act very passive, especially in the beginning. Assure remote students that you can see and hear them, and are responsive to their questions and learning needs. Let students know the protocol for asking questions. Do you want them to interrupt you (with a question or raised hand) or will you set aside time for questions?
- Start the first video conferencing session with an icebreaker activity to 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.
- Set expectations of students. Discuss etiquette, roles and responsibilities.
- Announce when and how you will conduct office hours for the local students and remote students.

B. Every Class Best Practices

- Arrive early.
- At the beginning of each session, remind students that they are expected to participate.
- Remind the students that this is a two-way video, which means that anything they say or do may be amplified and will be seen by all.
- Have materials out and ready to present before connecting. If using handouts be sure to have them supplied to all students at all locations.
- Ensure that the remote location can see and hear the instructor, the class and any projected media. Always ask if everyone can hear and see you properly before you begin.

C. Getting the Students Involved

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, 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.

Engage Students, Encourage Dialog, Establish Rapport and Promote Interactivity:

- Arrive early to the class. Before the class starts, talk with the students at the local and remote site via the videoconference.
- Learn the names of your students. Ask questions directly - by name and site.
- When asking the class if anyone has any questions, it is a good idea to ask the remote site if they have any questions, for example “does anyone in Machias or Fort Kent have any questions?”

- If you cannot tell who asked a question, ask.

- Balance the interaction among all sites. Take as many questions from the remote site as from the local site.

- Encourage discussion.

- Remote students may have trouble 'jumping into' the class discussion since body language that indicates they want to speak is less noticeable. So it is important to periodically ask for opinions and see if there are questions.

- When answering questions
 - Look into the camera and answer the person who asked the question.
 - See if the question can be answered by another student at a different site to generate discussion.

D. Best Practices on Camera

- Show interest in all students: Make a point of communicating with remote students by name and/or location.

- Remote students may have difficulty staying engaged, if the lecturer is not engaged, tense or bored. Make the session as energetic and interactive as possible.

- Try not to think of yourself as being on camera, just behave and talk naturally.

- Be aware of outgoing video. Assume that the remote students can see and hear everything, even when the camera is not on you.

Remember: In video conferencing visual and non-verbal aspects become more significant.

Eye Contact

To help remote students feel connected, create eye contact by looking at the camera when you are speaking to them and when they are speaking to you. If you do not 'create eye contact', students will feel as though they are just watching, not participating in the class. You may look at other students while you are speaking however try not to look beyond the scope of the camera. For example, if your eyes wonder out a window or into a hallway, remote students can feel disconnected from what they cannot see. You may want to practice with a monitor so you know what this looks like to the remote students.

Movement

- Video processing takes a toll on the transmitted picture and can result in "ghosting" or "pixilation". To minimize these effects move and gesture naturally and smoothly: Avoid sudden rapid motions, swaying, rocking or pacing.
- Sit up straight, don't lean back and avoid reading excessively; it shows off the top of your head.
- Be aware of the camera range and stay in it otherwise remote participants will not be able to see you.
- Minimize distractions; avoid things such as tapping or clicking a pen, fixing your hair or clothing. Try to relax and act natural.

Speaking

- Speak clearly in your normal voice and enunciate clearly.
- Talk naturally, using inflection and body language.
- Pause when you expect a response from the remote site.
- Repeat questions if necessary, and wait for remote participants to finish speaking before you respond.
- Speak at a comfortable pace but not too quickly.
- Do not participate in side conversations, everyone will hear you and it shows you aren't listening.

Eliminate Background Noise

Background noise can be very distracting to the video conferencing class. Avoid noise such as rattling keys, side conversations, tapping pens, papers rattling near microphones and doors opening and closing. Remind students to turn off their cell phones at the start of each class.

Clothing

Clothing and accessories look different on camera than in person. There are limitations to the video medium; strong contrast is difficult for the camera. As a result, the wrong choice of clothing or accessories can cause visual distortions, glare and bright reflections which can be distracting to remote students.

What works best on camera:

- Solid colors or muted patterns, in dark or neutral colors.
- Blue is the best color. Dark or neutral colors, earth tones and pastels also work well.
- Subtle jewelry.

What to avoid on camera:

- Busy patterns. Plaids, pinstripes, tweeds, checks, prints and glittery or reflective fabric.
- All white or a strong black/white contrast.
- Reds and blacks. They tend to “bleed” on the screen.
- Dangly, shiny jewelry or accessories can cause glare.

E. Room Specific Notes

- When possible, arrange tables and chairs in a U shape so that students can see the video screens and are in the camera’s visual range. If the class is not full, encourage students to sit in the middle of the class instead of on the sides.
- If the room has wireless microphones, the Microphones should be located in a charger on a side counter. When in the charger, the light on the Mics will be solid green when they are charged.
 - Distribute them evenly throughout the room.
 - Push the button to turn on the Mic. It will flash green while trying to sync with the system. When it has connected and is ready to use it will show solid green.

- Instruct the students not to tap microphones, move them around or bang/tap on table. Also be careful not to cover microphones with papers or hit the mute button.

AUDIO-VISUAL GUIDELINES

- Use colors in the middle of the color spectrum. Yellow on blue is commonly used. Black text on a pastel background is always safe. Avoid reds, oranges, and pinks – they tend to bleed when projected and black print on white paper – they tend to vibrate on screen.
- For Powerpoint and document camera presentations use large, bold, legibility text. Arial, Helvetica, Palatino, Lucida Sans, and MS Sans Serif fonts are good choices because of their equal thickness. Fonts with thin horizontal lines will vibrate on the television screen.
- Use the Master Slide Template within the Powerpoint program if possible. This will create a background and font style that carries through on all slides. It also makes it easier to make any necessary changes.
- Minimum font size for legible body text is 24 points; Optimal font size is 32 or larger; Use a 36 point for headers. (Sans Serif fonts are generally preferred.)
- Do not prepare material in ALL CAPS. Text will be too difficult to read. However, you can emphasize a point using caps.
- Do not underline unless necessary. When underlining, use a thick line. Thin lines will vibrate on the video screen.
- Keep all text and images 1” from all screen edges.
- Bullet information.
- Avoid the use of glossy or shiny material.
- Keep graphics and charts simple and use large labels.
- If graphic is complex, consider building it in subsequent steps.
- Set spacing to 1 1/2 or 150% of font size.
- Use a horizontal format (landscape) opposed to a vertical (portrait) format. Print on 8 1/2 “ x 11” paper for document camera material.
- For overheads use the 6 x 6 rule: 6 words or less per line and no more than 6 lines down.
- For Powerpoint use the 5 x 5 rule: 5 words or less per line and no more than 5 lines down.

- Ask the question, “Can I stand 10 feet from my computer and see my material clearly”?
- Spreadsheets are generally not successful; figures in cells are usually not readable.

- Pay attention to the screen’s aspect ratio. Make sure printed visuals fit within a 3x4 ratio. Use landscape orientation. There are different outcome views from different equipment. Make sure you adjust your presentation to fit the television screen from whatever equipment you may be using.

- When possible, test ahead of time.

- Allow time for viewing graphics. Leave materials up long enough for a slow reader to read.

- Make a hard copy of visuals available before the session.