# The Old Teacher in the New Classroom:
# Suggestions for effective distance instruction

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Preparing for the twenty-first century is a common theme that echoes through society. In education, the move into the new millenium provides an impetus to examine our delivery methods. This generation of students use remote controls and order fast food, therefore they expect flexibility in education; thus educators are seeking to provide alternative delivery methods. One of the first steps embraced by many institutions is the creation of interactive video studios. The classroom becomes loosely defined and students may participate with other students that are hundreds of miles away. As we transition into a new system, we must take this opportunity to update, revise and recognize good practices as well as those that may need improvement. Because the move necessitates change, we should examine current practices and mold them to meet new standards.

One of the most important confirmations for experienced teachers moving to a tele-teaching environment, is the realization that good teachers in traditional classrooms can become good teachers in interactive classrooms by making a conscious decision to seek effective techniques to providing quality education.

When a new instructor walks into an interactive classroom, he is initially overwhelmed with the technology. It is important to allow that to pass and focus on how the technology can support the content, not how the content can support the technology. In other words, don't try to incorporate every technological component initially. As your comfort level increases, add a component. One technique we use to provide that comfort level to Cameron University instructors is to provide a week of training. We state to the instructors that this week will be spent focusing on technology, not content. This focus gives them a level starting point—they are all beginners. The "rookie" mentality allows the participants to let down their guards and learn. Our in class presentations are specified as non-discipline oriented. Generally, participants choose relaxed topics such as fishing or knitting. We even had one group present personality profiles according to shoe types. The alternative of allowing discipline specific presentations leaves the participants in the "teacher" mode of "what do I know that you need to know." After the weeklong technology focus, they gain a level of comfort so that the focus can shift to content and the technology becomes second nature.

During the training sessions, effective strategies for interactive teaching are discussed. One of the most important is fostering interaction among the remote sites. There are several techniques that are important to "bridging the gap." One important consideration is to create involvement. Initially, the instructor must make a conscious effort to involve students at the remote sites. Jodi Reed and Merry Woodruff, authors of *Using Compressed Video for Distance Learning: An introduction to using videoconferencing technology for teaching*, suggest, "actively involve learners early and often, using small group or hands-on activities, reading, writing, discussion and questions to get them out of the passive viewing mode." I begin on the first day with a "meet your neighbor" type activity. This activity may be a trivia-oriented "introduce your neighbor" or the memory game introducing yourself and all of those before you. This is another non-threatening activity that allows the students to gain experience with the equipment without the pressure of answering questions.

A consideration to remember when speaking to students via cameras is to keep what the Teletraining Institute in Stillwater Oklahoma term as "aesthetic distance." If you have control of your cameras, do not zoom in too tightly. Keep a comfortable distance. That distance may be determined by including the students' elbows in the frame. Never zoom

in to include a "News Anchor" head and shoulders shot. This causes discomfort and achieves the opposite of the desired effect.

One phenomenon you will notice after teaching in this medium is your association of voices, rather than faces, to names. Unless you are an auditory learner, this is a new focus for you. Once barriers are broken through non-threatening activities, continue incorporating remote students by furthering discussion. Move beyond the inhibitions of technology by providing opportunities for interaction. Students may simply respond to questions, have open-mic. Discussions, or give individual reports. Telecourse professors should intentionally create interaction. Thomas Cyrs, author of *Teaching at a Distance with the Merging Technologies*, promotes scripting classroom activities. He suggests that an instructor go no longer than seven to ten minutes without inviting student participation (86). "Current literature on cooperative and active learning indicates significant improvement in learning and retention if students are actively involved in their own learning" (39). Cyrs suggests students should be involved at least thirty, preferably fifty percent of the teleclass time (86).

Another area of change is in communication. Professors must modify traditional office hours. Because sites may be hundreds of miles apart, an ITV instructor must provide alternative methods of interchange. This is one of the positive aspects. Some options are email, fax, phone, on-air office hours or news servers such as Hypernews. The nature of a composition course promotes text-based communication, so email has been successful for me. My students will ask specific questions that they might not ask face to face.

Correspondence with students becomes more important in this medium. To make a connection to the remote student, the instructor should make an effort to correspond individually with the students. Some email messages that might be conveyed are such things as greetings, current grades, assignments, or even site to site discussions. It is also meaningful to students to communicate traditionally at some point. I am close enough to my remote students that I go to the remote sites and broadcast from there. While there, I schedule five minute appointments to discuss student frustrations and individual progress in the course. If you are unable to travel, consider telephone or on-air appointments that will allow one on one traditional communication. These methods of communication break down many of the traditional barriers between student and professor.

Unique to video instruction is the focus on facial expressions. Verbal and nonverbal skills must be developed. The instructor's on camera attitude may further incorporate or distance remote students. ITV teachers must always be aware of camera presence and providing a positive image, welcoming students into your distant classroom. Verbal intonation carries heavier weight too. Students recognize tone and feel the distance or feel welcomed.

Though it is true that an effective teacher in the traditional classroom can be effective in the interactive video classroom, Reed & Woodruff note that it also amplifies poor teaching styles and strategies. They suggest devoting greater than normal effort toward preparation and development of instructional strategies to actively engage learners. It is necessary to use a variety of techniques to provide content and keep interest levels high. "Regular television is a passive medium, but instructional television is inherently active. Student passivity promotes student lethargy" (Cyrs, 36). These students watch television daily, and when they get bored, they pick up the remote control and change channels. With that awareness, the instructor becomes the remote and incorporates variety by adding audio, video, graphics, using presentation software, pulling in web pages, allowing student led discussions or even inviting guest speakers to share different perspectives. Format options include lecture, team teaching, cooperative groups, demonstrations, panel discussions, or case studies among other traditional formats. Another technique I use is silence. When learners are sharing in cooperative groups, I may place a graphic or leave a

question on the monitor and turn my audio off. This allows complete involvement in the small groups rather than distraction by movement on the monitor.

Formative evaluation identifies weaknesses in teaching. The ITV instructor may create an evaluation that allows students to comment about the success of the class. We provide a scaled questionnaire on which students respond to statements such as:

> ➢ Setting up the equipment delays class.
> ➢ The instructor can be heard clearly
> ➢ I feel welcome to participate in class.
> ➢ My learning would be different in a traditional class.
> ➢ Using the microphone is bothersome.

These questions focus on techniques, not instruction. Students are rating the use of equipment, not the ability to provide interesting content. By using a scale, the instructor recognizes deficiencies and revises accordingly.

Clearly, preparation for an ITV course takes much more time than traditional courses. Cyrs suggest that it may take three to five times longer to develop the first course, reducing to two to three times with experience. We have a discussion group that meets periodically throughout the semester to celebrate success and vent frustrations as well as update new techniques or train on new equipment.

ITV instructors create success by being aware of the necessity for change when transitioning into the distant environment. The key to success lies in the flexibility of the instructor. He must be pliable. As with any technology, components will fail and equipment may not work properly, but the class will not fail if the instructor is flexible, allowing shifts in planned procedures. Always have a secondary plan.

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