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## **Suggestions and Recommendations for the Use of Video Conference: the English Department at the University of Tlemcen as an Example**

By

Bensafa Abdelkader

### **Abstract**

This article suggests the integration of technology in language teaching and learning; mainly video conferences at higher education. Some important factors are raised and discussed concerning this pedagogical issue including namely; the use of video conferences for administrative and teacher development, course enhancement, and blended and/or distance learning. Finally, it ends by giving some recommendations and suggestions for better understanding and integrating video conferences to enhance the quality and the sustainability of higher education and scientific research in Algeria.

**Key words:** Algeria, Higher education, Video Conferences, Scientific Research

## **Introduction**

The use of ICT in education lends itself to more student-centered learning settings often this creates some tensions for some teachers and students. But with the rapid movement of the world into the information society, the role of ICT in education is becoming more and more important and its development will be continued through distance learning. It is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education which is becoming accepted and indispensable in the educational system in both developed and developing countries.

One of these technologies used is Video conferencing. It is a powerful alternative that educators can use to deliver instruction across distances. It can reduce barriers such as travel safety, costs and time that can impede trips designed for intellectual exchanges as it offers a viable means to develop a framework for addressing social and work place changing.

## **1. Pedagogical Applications of Video Conferencing**

The availability of new tools often creates opportunities for change in practice. Among these, Video conferencing and other networked tools can be effective in creating constructivist learning scenarios in which students use those tools to create their own solutions to curricular problems. The main pedagogical applications of VC are listed below

### **1.1. Advantages of Pedagogical Use of Video Conference**

Recently educational facilities have begun supporting university students taking advantages of video conferencing technology. Its equipments, i.e., video conference can help facilitate instruction and provide distant learners with a host of resources and access to content providers, teachers, and librarians. Moreover, adopting video conferencing as a method of content delivery will help enhancing communication and instruction. This can be done through connecting the local students with others outside the country and producing networks carrying

large volumes of video and text data. Other benefit students may have from video conferencing technology includes librarians who can use video conferencing to develop strategies, provide resources and improve the quality of their service and delivery.

Additionally, video conferencing facilitates learning by allowing remote or distant learners to meet regardless of their location. Students can take classes at multiple universities. In essence classes that are not available at one location may be available at another through video conferencing. Video conferencing can also benefit nontraditional students who are not able to attend classes during normal hours. it can also be used as a career or employee training tool. Many colleges are now collaborating with local businesses to offer students certification and business training. Expert subject matter delivered from individuals in the field is easily delivered to students using this new technology. Student can also take advantage of mentoring services offered by companies in distant locations using video conferencing technology. The possibilities are virtually endless.

As an interactive communication medium, another key benefit of video conferencing is that it's almost like being there. The visual link and communication among participants enhances understanding and helps participants connected to each other, supporting cooperation among traditionally isolated institutions. Also, video conferencing can improve preservation and appeal to a variety of student learning styles by including varied media such as video or audio clips, graphics, animations, computer applications and break-out discussions.

One of the benefits of the video conferencing seminars is that the students have a chance to meet experts to share their specific research interests. They can also attend presentations on a range of topics related to their areas of interest they might not otherwise engage with. Another valuable outcome of the video conferencing seminars is that students have a chance to discuss issues from different perspectives, which helps break down assumptions about related fields they may not realize they had. The video conferences enable students to exchange information and ideas in real-time at a distance.

In sum, these moments come up in face- to- face learning but video conferencing enables more meaningful relations between two sites at a distance.

## 1.2. Enhancing the Use of Video Conferences

The following suggestions could be given to enhance the use of VC as a new pedagogical technique. First, there is a need for more training in e-learning techniques and strategies for teachers and learners. This can be done through the gradual introduction of video conferences courses for students in general and teachers in particular. The second suggestion which may ensure a better use of video conferences is to try not to involve the learner with many courses using different techniques simultaneously. This is why a more strategic planning for the management of video conferences is needed. In other words, the university has to develop and adopt a strategy of gradual introduction of distance learning. Finally, ICT training should be driven by the *pedagogical* requirements of both teachers and students and not led by the technology itself. This last idea is a basic one and should always be considered when developing courses of this nature. The following criteria are of worthy value to anyone involved in developing and delivering video conferencing or other ICT related training courses associated with distance learning. The first of these is *including the key service providers in the University*: a multi- service approach for the design, development and delivery of this type of training ensures that there is a necessary combination of educational, technical and presentational skills as well. These service providers also have an important role to play in promoting, supporting and managing the video conferencing facility and its use at the university level.

The second is to *provide training at a departmental level*: where possible, it is necessary for the staff to provide the training at a departmental level. This allows them to have training in the same line with the strategic teaching and learning needs of that department. Therefore staff development should not only be servicing the needs of the individual but also those of the organization. This idea is supported by Gibbs and Blackmore who believe that “... staff development becomes an adjunct to organizational development rather than a personal matter”

(as cited by Maier et al (1997)). Additionally, where possible, departmental support staff should be included in all video conferencing and ICT related training. This provides an opportunity for an appreciation of the complementary roles of the teacher with their needs and the support staff with their technical expertise. Support staff should be encouraged to obtain a dynamic role in video conferencing and ICT related training.

The third ingredient is to *be apparent concerning the objectives of the training*: the reinforcement of effective teaching with video conferencing is the requirement for a good communication and presentational skills to ensure good teaching practices. This is why when designing training; it is important to be clear about the boundaries of that training. In other words, the central issue of video conferencing training should not be to teach the basics of good presentation or effective teaching. These supporting skills should be addressed in other staff development courses and built upon in video conferencing training.

The fourth cue is to *use a methodical approach in designing training*: it is, in fact, important when designing training to identify and explore all the appropriate components as early as possible. It would be recommended, at this level, to use an approach, like the ‘moral framework’ as it provides a checklist and a means of cross referencing that all components and their interrelationships have been considered. The framework is also useful in evaluating and communicating progress with all project team members.

The fifth key is *thinking carefully about who delivers the training*: the trainers can greatly affect the shape and style of any training. They should have previous experience in ICT training if possible; have experience of using the technology to teach. This ensures that they will have firsthand knowledge of the subject area and can empathize with participants, appreciating their fears and anxieties. They can also share experiences and suggest innovative applications of the use of technology.

The sixth parameter is to *balance the training methods*: making a balance of training methods is required to ensure that the participants are given the opportunity to acquire information, assimilate and reflect on it, view it in their own context and gain experience themselves. Evaluations to date have been very positive in terms of the content and teaching methods with the participants finding most benefit from the practical and hands-on sessions.

The final phase to be mentioned is to *make the trainees aware of the potential barriers to learning*: for an effective use of technology, staff needs to have a positive reception of the limitations of the technology. In addressing these 'potential barriers to learning' suggestions can be made on how to cope and manage the effective delivery of teaching.

## **2. Preparing Good Conditions for Video Conference**

After having a look on the pedagogical implications and how to better enhance the use of video conference, the following part summarizes some of the conditions that should be taken into consideration when preparing for video conference sessions.

### **2.1. Technical Preparation for Video Conference**

The technology of video conferencing has advanced rapidly in recent years. Picture and sound quality of large room-based systems are reasonable and the costs of installing and running them have dropped so that they are now becoming a realistic option for institutions teaching or planning to teach across more than one site using video conference.



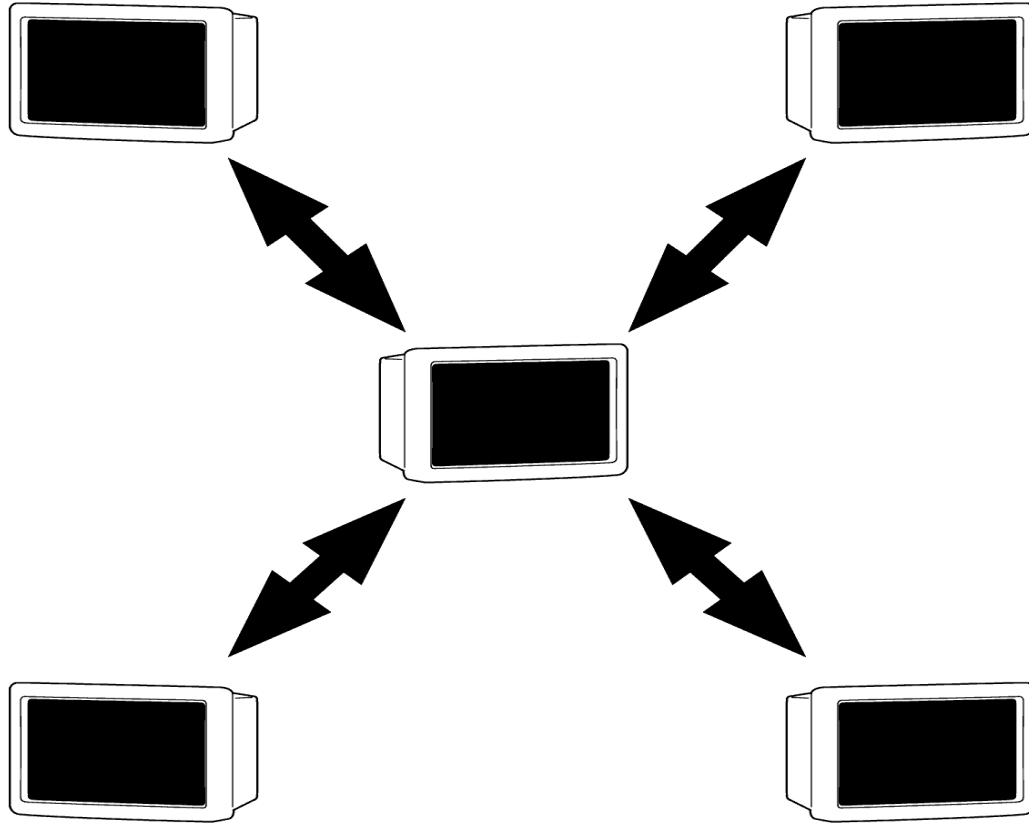
Video conferencing systems can be broadly grouped into three categories:

- ✓ Room based or 'studio' systems designed for use by from perhaps five participants up to a lecture theatre or even a large conference.
- ✓ Roll about systems, designed to enable the system to be portable. Typically, these systems are designed for small group use
- ✓ Desktop based systems designed for individual or small group use.

Furthermore, the distinction between point to point systems where two sites are linked- this study was the case- and multi-point systems where one main site is linked to a number of sites simultaneously can be illustrated through Figures 4. 1/4. 2



**Figure1. Single point**



**Figure2. Multi-point**

The following ideas aim at providing staff that are using or planning to use video conference including small size group number of students with the necessary guidelines. Those guidelines were developed from the existing literature of using a point to point video conference system and while the issues are not specifically addressed to multi-point systems, many of which are also applied to them.

### 2.1.1 The Role of the Technician

Having a technician is a key factor in the technical preparation of video conference. He will take care of the controls during the sessions. For this to happen, the staff should be provided with this support- at least for the first sessions. When it comes to the fact of working with a technician, the following ideas are necessary to take into consideration:

- ✓ It is necessary to familiarize the local teacher and even the students with the controls, this will help them understand what can be done with the equipment while a technical problem or a delay appears.
- ✓ Meeting with the technician in advance will also help to discuss the issues related to the plans program; the visuals needed for the display as well as making any camera adjustments required.

### 2.1.2 The Visual Display Equipment

As mentioned in the last point related to the role of the technician, the equipment in the video conference room is far better in many respects than that found in most traditional classrooms. Typical facilities are:

- ✓ A document camera for displaying overhead-type graphics, information from books, photographs and small objects. It is a very versatile tool. Objects as well as documents can be displayed. The camera will be able to zoom in to reveal detail that could not be seen by students in a conventional lecture if the teacher just held the object. In addition, because the environment is not controlled in which the object is being seen, the teacher can be sure that all students will be able to see the detail and not just a few at the front.
- ✓ A slide projector. This will help in power point presentations.
- ✓ A PC link for displaying presentation packages, spreadsheets and databases.
- ✓ A video recorder.
- ✓ A whiteboard for spontaneous writing and drawing.

In addition to the above facilities, a fax/copier is very useful. This will help both teachers fax handouts or copies of work done by student groups within the session. Sound quality and good lighting need to be checked carefully, and often, a short introductory practice session can usefully resolve any difficulties in these areas. Audio feedback is avoided by placing the microphones well away from the main monitor's speaker system, for example. Failure to do this can result in a most amazing echo effect, as voices are beamed back across the world

### **2.1.3 Preparing the Room and Equipment**

Video conferencing relies on seeing and hearing. A poor picture can make communication difficult and without sound, the video conference cannot take place at all. It is therefore essential to test the connection before the conference begins by check the type of system being used at the far-end and arrange of informal test. Technical difficulties can usually be sorted out and adjustments to the physical environment can also be addressed. Additionally, some thought to arrangements in the room are needed. For example, planning where contributors will sit may help so that movement will not disrupt the flow of the event. Consequently, video conference partners will be more interested in seeing the students than their furniture

## **2.2 Teachers' Preparation for Video Conference**

Using video conferencing technology has changed the normal teaching environment and this can cause concern for both teachers and students. However, by approaching the possibilities offered by video conferencing in a positive manner the teaching experience can be turned out to be successful for all concerned. Preparing teachers for the use of video conference may have concerns related to the following issues:

Many teachers are not able to use the video conferencing equipment because of its complexity though it is designed to be easy to use and there will be basic guidelines supplied with the system. However, the best solution is to push them practice and use the equipment

themselves. If it is possible, having a technician to control the equipment when they are teaching is necessary as mentioned above. This will certainly make giving the session easier.

Being aware of the limitations and possibilities that using this particular technology offers will assist with the planning of the sessions and make them more effective. For example, by thinking about what can be done visually with the equipment, teachers may think of ways in which their sessions can become more interactive.

Teachers will have to adapt their particular teaching style when using video conferencing. One of the difficulties in teaching at a distance is the potential alienation felt by students at the remote site; the teacher is not at those students' site and they cannot interact with him as they normally would. The teacher can have difficulties in receiving feedback through the body language they normally have in a traditional classroom.

### **2.3 Students' Preparation for Video Conference**

Students need to be prepared in advance for their videoconference. They need to be comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning via videoconference as well as with the technology itself. It is most important for students to know the purpose/objectives of the course in general and the videoconference component in particular. A course outline should be provided. The later explains the role of videoconferencing in the program and any expectations regarding pre- or post-reading and/or activities. Any requirements regarding attendance and participation should be stated.

Students will have to learn about the concepts to be presented in the video conference in the weeks/month prior to the scheduled video conference. The objectives of a successful video conference have to be aligning with the curriculum goals. They can be asked to develop questions to ask on the day of the conference at least 1-2 weeks before the video conference. A day before the video conference teachers may Review video conferencing protocol with the students. If possible, allow students a "practice session" to familiarize themselves with the

format of the conference. Additionally, students will be seated or “in position” before connecting. This will help familiarizing students with the technology. A simple guide can be issued to students providing them with information on teaching and learning through videoconferencing, and appropriate opportunities to discuss that information (particularly the importance of interaction and the expectations in this regard).

### **3. Recommendations for a Better use of Video Conference**

Although there is a considerable body of literature concerning the use of video conferences in higher education, certain aspects are recommended and require future consideration and more explanation. They are listed in the following sections:

#### **3.1. Recommendations to Teachers**

The following recommendations are seen by the researcher to have a direct impact on the effectiveness and appropriate use of video conference as a means of content delivery as well as facilitate the task for teachers opting for this new medium. The first is related to *Investigating and developing instructional designs and learning activities*. It would be preferable if those activities focus on providing space and motivation for students. This will help them work individually and collaboratively to create and share their own understandings of learning content using video conferencing, besides, other information and communications technologies. To achieve the purpose of working in collaboration teachers are also recommended participating in any online or face-to-face in learning networks whenever possible. This will facilitate the task of sharing ideas of successful teaching and supporting each other.

The second recommendation is linked to *increasing personal competency with videoconferencing and other digital technologies*. This can be done by exploiting the professional development opportunities and self-study provided by the technologies themselves.

Additionally, it may help enhancing personal productivity in performing instructional, professional and administrative tasks.

The last point related to recommendation to teachers is *integrating other media into the lessons*. By doing so, learners will be able to acquire the skills of searching, personalizing, and manipulating information from many sources to construct their own knowledge. This can be supported by developing blended learning opportunities for students and teachers alike whereby face- to- face encounters among participants are blended with video-conferencing and online learning opportunities. Additionally, the development of activities whereby students can learn how to use and control the videoconferencing technology will help to co-create their own learning experiences.

### **3.2. Recommendations to Administration**

When it comes to the level of administration or staff opting or planning for the use of video conference, the following recommendation are said to be of great value. The first one is *providing central coordination and policy development*. This will help supporting distance education enrichment and administrative applications of networked technologies, including video-conferencing. Additionally, providing opportunities for formal and informal training via networking among teachers who are using video-conferencing technologies will ensure that they are dependent upon communications technology and have a technical support so that active learning in their classes will be available.

The second is related to *developing ICT policies*. This can be done with the intention that teachers who participate in distance education programming are supported in the efforts involved in effectively teaching in distributed contexts. To do so, organizations should provide effective supervision and support for students in remote video-conferencing classrooms by developing cost effective ways. These will likely include: designs such as use of teacher aides, on-call support from administrative or other teaching staff, construction of remote video-

conferencing rooms with direct observation by school staff, and other strategies to provide assistance to students and the remote teacher in a timely fashion.

The last recommendation is *a continuum support for the emerging video-conferencing*. This can be done through focused community of practice by: first, continuing the secondment of educator/leaders from the system to provide province wide coordination, training and support for the videoconferencing community. Second, continuing support and animation of the online community. Third, maximizing the capacity of the Super Net will facilitate the transition of documents in any medium as well as support document exchange between and among students and teachers. This can be done by making use of the capacity of available technologies to make this task as seamless and easy as distributing materials in a face-to-face classroom. Fourth, continue support for the development of TD resources available anytime and anywhere for new and experienced video-conferencing teachers. These should including: promising practice guidelines, instructional videos related to both pedagogical and technological training on effective video-conferencing application, community building, support and advice forums, technical reviews and announcements of new technologies, and results and reviews relevant video conferencing related research studies.

### **3.3. Recommendations to Learners:**

In the same line with teachers and administration, learners are considered as being an important part of video conference. This is why they are recommended first: to *learn to use the video-conferencing technologies*. This will offer them new source of knowledge suitable to their classes and learning environment. This can be done through an imaginatively plan for ways that this environment can be most effectively used to enhance their education.

Additionally, they are recommended to *develop a spirit of being assertive in remote video-conferencing classrooms*. This will ensure that no one disrupts or deprives them of their learning opportunities. This study indicates that insufficiently functioning technology (due to



network problems and incorrectly setup hardware) leads to ineffective learning situations. Research on distance education has found that pedagogy is more important than technology in order to affect learning (Phipps & Merisotis: 1999). Additionally, it is agreed but also claimed that technology must work properly if the students have the chance to learn at all. This is why the use of unstable technology clearly affects the learning situation negatively for the students, which focused too much on the failing technology instead of their learning tasks.

The last recommendation is related to *avoiding being refrained from using video conferences*. During this type of courses students are also recommended not to neglect the synchronous tools due to problems with perceived audio and video quality. This will reduce motivation among them because of the problems with the network and hardware. This study showed that some important aspects of a good learning environment were put aside because of the problem with the underlying technology. It is, therefore, important to consider basic issues such as reliable technology and infrastructure, guidelines and pedagogical methods in order to develop easy to use learning environments that include desktop video-conferencing.

An important conclusion is that there is need for continuous support during a distributed course that uses more advanced technologies like video-conferencing tools. This is important not only for the setup and maintenance of desktop computers and the net-based learning environments, but also for support with pedagogical issues such as recommendation of course design and pedagogical methods and training. It is at least as important to educate the teachers about the technology and pedagogical aspects as having a working net-based learning environment. Using the most suitable pedagogical techniques is simply as important as the material to be studied, and perhaps even more so than for traditional courses. Despite many shortcomings in current examples of distributed courses, this study shows some interesting results indicating that a combination of synchronous and asynchronous methods can be fruitful in net-based learning environments. In conclusion, attaining an effective environment for net-based learning includes not only working technology but also a well-planned course where the incentive to use the technology is clear.

Despite these views, there is current excitement over the development of low-cost pc-based video conferencing, using public domain software and small cameras. If video of the client becomes just a further data type, so the argument goes, and then video will be used naturally to support communication. Where high-bandwidth communication, high-bandwidth in the psychological sense, is found to be significant, then video will be demanded. Whatever thing is possible with video conferencing if sufficient amount of money is available. However, institutes must have a clear plan about how they to teach as well as where they want teaching to be delivered before committing to a specific delivery technology if cost effective systems are to be well established.

## Conclusion

The foremost profit of using video conferencing is overcoming the limitations of distance. With diverse technologies, it is feasible to connect geographically dispersed persons or groups to include an assembly or a collaborative work session. As seen, throughout this work, video conferencing is a wide-ranging term covering many technologies and possibilities. A video conference can be among two or multiple locations, it can make use of focused equipment or run a normal computer – it can be assisted with content sharing, accompanied with other response channels and it can also be streamed live or recorded for later use. There are many solutions and some of them might be recognized as being better for a definite case than others. Additionally, choosing the most suitable video conferencing tools and utilizing them to their best ability can be a confusing task especially for a novice. By selecting the finest tools, and utilizing them according to the optimum practices, it seems to be possible to embrace a successful conference, and, thus, to empower the participants to take advantage of the new technology by overcoming the limitations of distance.

In the same line of thought, video conferencing enhancements also need not be scheduled every day, but instead used for special events such as guest speakers, debates, personal

introductions, and other enrichment activities. In other words, adopting a blended learning setting, much of which is based on lower cost technologies, could lower or eliminate altogether jurisdictions' current need to expand their room-sized video-conferencing capacity. The minimum requirement to achieve reasonable sound quality is to have the video conferencing room free from external distractions. Also the microphone(s) should be of some quality. In an optimum scenario, there would be a single (possibly wireless) microphone for the presenter and group microphones for the participants. Thus utilizing an audio mixer with noise gate and echo cancellation helps the quality – this functionality is nowadays integral to many separate video conferencing end-points and even in some web conferencing solutions.

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