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Ontario's Distance Education & Training Network  
Le réseau d'éducation et de formation à distance de l'Ontario

## VIDEOCONFERENCING TEACHING ACTIVITIES

As suggested in the document Videoconferencing: Instructional Design Considerations, there is a tendency for students to remain passive during a videoconference, much as if they were watching television. In order to readily involve them it is important to invest some time in designing highly interactive content that will achieve the course objectives and outcomes. As with traditional classroom teaching, straight lecturing does not make the best use of videoconferencing. However transferring in-class activities to the videoconferencing format requires adjustments or considerations. It is important to facilitate sessions properly and be aware of technical limitations. The following examples of videoconference teaching activities are offered as suggestions for you to consider as you plan for your videoconference classes.

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### Student Presentations

Student presentations, while valid for some purposes, should not be relied on for delivering key content. If you do choose to involve students in this way, it is advisable that you facilitate sessions at all times. Limit individual student presentations to 5-10 minutes and moderate a question period afterward.

Students would normally display their own presentation materials, however if you are going to present visuals on their behalf have the students send them to you well ahead of class time. If possible, toggle the screen so the presenting student or group is the biggest window on the monitor. Have students refer to any slides or handouts that they made available ahead of time.

Following the session, ask students to reflect on the presentation(s) and offer impressions by way of a discussion board or email group.



**TIP:** A great way to get classmates to engage in student presentations is to send out material to read beforehand.

## Group Work

You can incorporate group activities in a videoconference similarly to the way you would use them in class with certain variations to accommodate the technology. Bear in mind, however, that you may have sites with only one participant. In such group activities may best be completed outside of the videoconference using other communication technologies. However, if your sites are populated accordingly, you can use group work to add variety to your sessions.

You may find it a challenge at first as you can't simply walk from group to group to answer questions and offer assistance, but you will find other ways to communicate with individual groups (by phone, for example, or via instant messaging or email if possible).



## Breakout Groups

You can use breakout groups to have students brainstorm ideas in small groups that will be discussed with the whole class, to help students deepen their understanding of topics, or as a strategy to cover a lot of material in a little time.

It is advisable to divide students into groups according to sites so that they can work together in the same physical space during the session. Always have students read preparatory material ahead of the live session or think about the topic before coming to class. Before breaking into groups be sure that all students know the specific topic, the goal of the breakout activity, and the time limit. Put all this information on a slide that they will be able to view while working. Be sure to have all sites mute their audio. You can turn your audio on when you wish to speak to the whole class.

When the activity is completed, switch from the slide view to the normal view and have a representative from each group summarize their group results. Limit the time to 2-3 minutes per group. You may wish to have a summary made available to the students following the videoconference.

## Role-Playing

With adequate preparation and planning, role-playing activities can also be transformed for the videoconferencing environment. You can begin with a brief lecture about a particular controversy, case study, or topic of interest. Then divide up the classes and locations into small groups, each of which are given a particular role to play in the activity. As groups research and prepare their roles, have each site turn off their monitors and mute their audio.

When students have had adequate time to prepare, rejoin the videoconference and chair a town hall session where groups, in turn, address specific questions based on their characters/identities. Following the activity, give groups at each location an opportunity to reflect on the results and offer their thoughts on what they have learned.

**TIP: Role-playing can also be done with students groups by location. Ask groups at each location to act out the scenario at their own sites followed by an opportunity for all groups to share their experiences and results.**

## Debates

Debates, much like role-plays, can be designed for the videoconference environment. Once in session, the debate could occur in one of two ways: all the people at one site get into opposing groups and have the rest of the sites listen while they debate the issue. Non-debating sites could evaluate the debate and vote for the winning team. Proceed in the same way for all the groups.

Alternatively, debates can consist of two opposing teams from different locations. In either case, give each student 2-3 minutes to defend their position and stop them when their time is up. After the videoconference, have students prepare a summary of the event and their impressions of the session.

**TIP: If possible, post topics for your debate online before the scheduled session and create two discussion areas where students can go to ask questions, discuss issues, and post material.**

## Group Discussions

Group discussion comes in all shapes and sizes, and as a teaching technique it can serve to reach a variety of objectives. If a discussion format is chosen to maximize student involvement or practice opportunity for a particular skill, then small groups of two or three that allow everyone to participate simultaneously can be used. On the other hand, if the intent is to deal with information from the class as a whole, then a larger format or some means of pooling the input is required.

Different group structures can produce different kinds of learning. **Buzz groups** or **brain storming sessions** involve short time limits, group sizes of four to eight, and have as a purpose generating large numbers of ideas either including evaluation of them or not. An **expanding group structure** or **pyramid group** starts with ideas from individuals or pairs then after a set time period combines to quartets to share and evaluate ideas generated then combines with still another group to compile a full range of thoughts. Dealing with this pattern when there are few students at some sites may become challenging to coordinate.

If discussions are to occur at each site separately, careful plans must be included for a designated student or other facilitator to keep each group functional and on track. It is quite a different setting than in a single classroom of five or six groups when the instructor can “wander” as a sort of floating trouble-shooter or monitor.

**TIP: A short period of small group activity is okay during the videoconference, however longer group work should be scheduled out of session.**

## Group Projects

Group projects refer to more involved group activities than a single discussion session and typically focus on increasing the skills of group processes or interaction. Being able to work in teams is important in school, community, or workplace activities. Business courses, for example, routinely require group projects in order to reach objectives dealing with the improvement of teamwork skills relevant to the business world: listening, organizing, delegating, cooperating, discussing, presenting, etc. Such objectives are appropriate to many areas outside business as well.

Group projects for videoconference courses will need to accommodate special needs for communication between group members if they are from different sites. Deciding whether groups should include members from different sites could be an important consideration when structuring a project assignment. A related decision will involve whether (or how much) in session class time should be used for such work and how best to link groups.

As with any group assignment, the parameters must be clear (final product definitions, time lines for intermediate stages, due dates, etc.), and much more structure should be provided to less mature students.

## Questioning

Questions are a vital part of good instruction, but are generally not used as often or effectively as they could be. Good questions invite the learner to engage the material meaningfully in order to master it and attach it to his or her own body of knowledge.

Often less than 2 to 5 percent of classroom time involves teacher-asked questions.

Questions can be classified into three broad types:

- **Recall questions** require direct knowledge of facts to which the learner has been exposed. “Define parabola”, “What is the difference between vertebrates and invertebrates?” and “Explain the rock cycle”, are all recall questions. Learners must have been explicitly taught the answers before they could logically be expected to correctly answer the questions. Questions like these are a legitimate part of practice and feedback for objectives that require knowledge.
- **Application questions** require the use of information in some context not specifically taught (these questions require higher order thinking processes). To answer “If you are standing in a hurricane with the wind at your back, is the eye on your left or your right?” requires more than factual recall. But a student knowledgeable of the wind patterns in a hurricane can derive the correct answer through the comprehension of those patterns.
- **Divergent questions** have multiple possible answers and are used to develop logical reasoning, inventiveness, and imagination. “How could you design an experiment to prove...?”, “What if...?”, or “How many ways can you think of to...?” are all divergent questions that allow students to generate ideas, prioritize strategies, evaluate solutions, apply logic, devise experiments, in short to think in ways that are valuable to learning.

Part of instructional design and lesson planning for distance learning should include the extensive pre-planning of questions, preferably those that force the application or comprehension of material and that eventually require students to generate and evaluate diverse responses.



## Practice

Practice is an important activity generally required for full mastery of an objective and includes almost any activity that forces the student to become engaged with the new information: written exercises, spoken dialogues, time to practice a physical skill just demonstrated or applying classification rules to a sorting exercise.

All of these tasks change the pace of a class, but more importantly, they require that the students interact with the content just presented. For example, judging actual behaviours of infants and children as normal, delayed, or advanced in relation to normal development guidelines makes the particulars far more tangible and more a part of students' working knowledge than simply copying the ages and stages information from an instructor's lecture.

**Practice can be completed by individual students, pairs, or even larger groups. It may be better to go off-line during some of the scheduled class time for practice and then regroup in session to discuss.**

## Summary

Successful integration of teaching activities conducive to the videoconferencing environment and appropriate to your learning objectives requires careful course planning. To challenge yourself and your students, consider which activities will best engage your students and deepen their learning.



## Resources

Videoconferencing. 1997. Contact North.

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[http://de.ryerson.ca/portals/de/assets/resources/Videoconferencing\\_Activities.pdf](http://de.ryerson.ca/portals/de/assets/resources/Videoconferencing_Activities.pdf) accessed *April 11, 2012*