

Not-So-Distant Education

by Nancy Knowlton

Back in the eighties and nineties, many educational institutions were experimenting with distance education. Universities and colleges saw a dramatic rise in the number of professionals who needed to upgrade their knowledge and credentials through additional courses. These pioneering students worked during the day and took distance education classes at night. A network connection was typically made between a classroom teacher and students in a remote location. Both voice and data were usually shared over a basic telephone line, sometimes over two lines.

At SMART we worked with one distance education program that produced incredible results – students at remote locations routinely performed better on tests than students in the classroom. But before we got too excited about the future of distance education, we realized that the remote students were typically older and perhaps more motivated than the students living the good life on campus.



Nonetheless, dataconferencing, or audiographics, as it was first called, became a proven technological solution to many challenges that traditionally stood between students and learning.

Today, distance education options are rapidly appearing in K–12 settings, too. Just how are conferencing solutions being used today and what are the benefits?

Teacher Shortages

Every day a school or district announces a shortage of teachers, and with a large number of impending retirements, the problem is only going to get worse over the next few years. It's not just a shortage in absolute numbers – it's an acute shortage of math and science teachers in urban and rural areas alike.

Distance education is a viable solution under such circumstances. Picture a single teacher covering multiple classes with a teacher's assistant in connected classrooms. Think also about the shortage of fully qualified math and science teachers. How about putting the best physics teacher in front of all tenth-grade students in a district to help them learn to love the science? Then imagine some remote

communities where distance education offers local students the same opportunities as their big-city counterparts with all the advanced and optional courses.

Connecting to Nontraditional Classrooms

Museums, art galleries, zoos and government entities are increasingly offering educational programs. With field trips becoming more costly in some instances and impossible in others, connecting multiple classrooms to these outreach programs offers not just variety but an enriched experience for all involved.

Connecting to Other Classrooms

There's nothing like connecting with students in other classrooms to collaborate on a project. Projects take on new meaning and can be eagerly completed and shared.

Moderating Costs

It's another widely chronicled issue – not enough money to go around. Sharing teacher resources is one strategy that can stretch budget dollars further, particularly in the upper grades, where classes are more like lectures.

Strategies for Teaching at a Distance

Teaching is different in a classroom with remote students. Teachers need to develop strategies and methodologies for including remote learners throughout the lesson. Providing professional development, technical support and opportunities to share with colleagues will go a long way toward ensuring success.

Every Classroom

With virtually every classroom in North America connected to the Internet, and with many more connected around the world, the basic infrastructure is in place for classrooms to be able to conference via, at least, voice and data. The costs are not high and the benefits can be substantial.

Many schools today are starting to install videoconferencing suites. This is reminiscent of the early introduction of computers in labs. The quicker that conferencing technology becomes pervasively available, the sooner it will simply be yet another standard tool in every teacher's toolkit.

An Emerging Trend

Distance education isn't something that's coming soon. It's here now and it presents some great solutions to some real problems. You don't have to have issues of sparsity and distance to make it an appealing option for students, teachers and administrators.

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