Video conferencing in the Classroom

Case Studies of Effective Practice

Case Study Six
Monkseaton Community High School

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ICT Research

Contents

School background

Monkseaton is a mixed 13-18 community school, located in small seaside town in the north-east. It has 688 students on roll, with about a third in the post-16 sector. There is a very small number of English language second speakers. The school has invested in a large number of PCs (350) and there is a wireless network in the school, with laptop use by staff. There are 66 FTE teachers and three ICT technicians.

History of video conferencing in the school

The school has been using video conferencing since 1996, but this has not been a smooth history. Personnel changes and technical difficulties have meant that the use of video conferencing has been episodic rather than constant. However, these difficulties have now largely been overcome. Initial finance came from European Telematic Project funding, which was used to buy equipment for both the school and their European partners. The school had also supported running costs with the French partner because of the greater expense of ISDN in France. Language college status has also been helpful in promoting and financing video conferencing.

Philosophy of video conferencing use

Video conferencing extends students at all levels of ability in languages. Even challenging students will get engaged during the course of a session. It increases their self-confidence in their use of the language and is therefore an important part of the language strategy. It is also a cost- and time-effective way of delivering the languages curriculum. Funding video conferencing at about £2000 per annum is seen as an effective for languages students to have exposure to authentic language speakers that would otherwise cost about £7,500 a year. The school also argues that a study by the University of Durham on their students indicated that an accumulative experience of over 10 hours had an impact on GCE grades. This was a control and test group trial on a small number of students.

The general conclusion was that video conferencing impacted on the number of C grades in the test group, increasing marks related to listening and speaking in particular. However, the benefits of video conferencing are seen as going beyond this, as it includes entertainment as well as educational value. It motivates young people because it gives them access to other voices of their own age and in a real context, rather than being staged as in a video clip. Moreover, there are benefits for language teachers, in that it keeps them in direct contact with those who teach languages in other countries.

Video conferencing equipment and location

The school uses both Polycom and Picture Tel video conferencing equipment, through both ISDN and IP connections. There are two dedicated video conferencing suites, one holding three and the second

holding 30 students. There is also one stand-alone system with limited mobility. Projection is by any number of facilities from a TV screen to a large projector. An interactive whiteboard or a document camera can also be used. The historical average has been a pattern of use of about once a week. In the recent past, maternity leave by a key member of the languages department meant that this declined. With her return, the traditional pattern of use has re-established itself.

Current patterns of use

Video conferencing is largely located within the Languages department, although it is also used for liaison with feeder schools in the locality. The main contacts are therefore with French and Spanish schools, but this is being expanded to a German school. The main target groups for systematic use are Year 10 and Year 11 GCSE language students. A wide variety of models of use are deployed from one-to-one pupil use to remote teaching of whole classes. However, the main model is for small groups of students to interchange with a small number abroad. In addition, video conferencing has been used for job interviews and conference presentations.

Post-16 students had a requirement to use video conferencing in their lunch hours to interact with European schools. This would mean that the video conferencing equipment was in daily use. Younger students also have supervised sessions and this is often as part of a timetabled lesson, in which small groups of students will be video conferencing in series.

Examples of effective practice

In making links with European partners, the school encourages the remote partners to come to the Languages Show in London each year. This has two beneficial effects. Firstly, it means that those new to the video conferencing partnership can meet, be trained and brought on board. Secondly, detailed curriculum planning can take place, identifying parallel groups, curriculum matches, programmes and schedules for the actual conferences arranged.

> 'You learn more doing that (video conferencing) regularly than you do from Mr French because he has not got a natural accent. In class, we don't get that much practice in speaking French, we just get practice in writing it.'
>
> Year 10 male student of French

Conferences are firmly located within GCSE and A-level specifications, with identified learning outcomes. Sessions have been arranged in a series of 10, each one linked to a topic that might come up in the examination. For example, in one observed session, the topic was 'personal information' which was an element in the GCSE specification followed by the school. The video conference offered an opportunity to practise the vocabulary related to personal information with a French person. The near end teacher was able to chart improvements in listening skills and fluency in speaking the target language. The students are able to establish authentic banks of phrases, not only connected with the GCSE topic, but with the nature of the interchange itself, for example asking the remote speaker to repeat or elaborate, or asking supplementaries. They also remember phrases more easily as they are used in a real life situation. The cumulative impact for languages students is therefore a build up of confidence in speaking and listening to the target language.

> 'I learned a different way of asking people for their names, as I had been taught another phrase by my teacher.'
>
> Year 10 female student of French

The peer tutoring aspect of building up a relationship with a specific remote individual is important. Therefore the emphasis is on small groups or one-to-one work rather than whole class exchanges and as far as possible, with the same people each session. Typically, video conferencing will therefore occur with small groups of a larger class, the rest of whom are engaged in other ICT languages work, while awaiting their turn at video conferencing. Where larger numbers are involved in video conferencing, there is a danger that noise levels will increase unacceptably. This is not because the students are uninterested – on the contrary, they are likely to be preparing for their turn and unaware of the impact of their talking/practising on those who are actually speaking to camera. Thus, the aim is to keep the numbers video conferencing at any time small and, preferably, in a separate area from the larger class.

Students are usually rehearsed before video conferencing, although they may not always know it. They will for example practise specific phrases with each other on a particular examination topic, which can then be drawn upon for an interchange with remote students. To consolidate learning, students are sometimes required to tell the rest of the class what went on, or videos of the actual conference are shown.

Rules for turn taking are well established (five minutes in each language in turn) and students are occasionally reminded of these before a session. Teacher intervention is used if the rules are not being observed fairly. Where loss of visual capability occurred in an observed session, it became more difficult for the students to adhere to the rules for turn-taking and they lost the advantage of watching others speak the language.

A one-to-one intensive arrangement for post-16 students offers them the same range of advantages: improving listening skills and confidence, giving them an authentic experience and improving fluency, but at a deeper level. Each student would be offered the opportunity to do a weekly video conference of half an hour with a named collaborator. This provides regular planned practice to reinforce language structures in areas that they have learned. For one 'quiet' A-level French student, the experience allowed her to gain the confidence and mastery of language to sustain a sophisticated and long conversation with a remote other who had become a French friend. The post-16 students then take their learning to offer video conference taught sessions with a feeder middle school to a whole class to reinforce what they have learned. This allows them to consolidate their understanding of the target language.

'It is important to be able to look into their eyes, because it is more personalised, you can actually look into their eyes and have a conversation with them in another language.'

Year 11 female student of Spanish

In one observed session, the school had been unable to establish a reliable link to their Spanish High School partners. Rather than give their students an experience that might be disrupted by technological problems, the teacher made arrangements for the Spanish assistants (who was starting at the school next week) to come in and deliver the 'far end' from a room downstairs in the department. The students were unaware of this at the time of the conference. The starter for the session was geared towards the use of the first and third person, which was to be the focus of the video conference exchanges.

One male student appeared to be disengaged at this point, but he did immediately begin to take interest when the video conference segment started. This was integrated into the learning outcomes identified by the teacher, with the students asking questions of the Spanish speaker and the 'far end' adult responding slowly and clearly to allow maximum acquisition of the vocabulary and language structure desired. This segment lasted only 10 minutes.

As a follow-up, the near end teacher then used a quiz format to test the acquisition of the appropriate vocabulary and form, and then students were required to write a paragraph about the answers they had received by transforming them into the third person. This was linked to the assessment target of the specification of writing about a 'famous person'. The extension activity was that students were allowed to go online and find out information about Shakira, the Spanish songstress. The group would be debriefed on the actual experience of video conferencing in the next session.

> 'It's better than looking at the same teacher every day!'
>
> Year 11 male student of Spanish

Management of video conferencing

Co-ordination

Because of the location of video conferencing in the languages department, it is the head of languages who takes the lead in coordinating activity within the school. This primarily means a focus on coordinating the language department, but it also involves others in the school. There is a full-time support worker in languages who assists in preparatory work as well as support during conferences. She can call on wider technical support when needed.

Integration into the curriculum

All pre-16 students in languages would be offered an opportunity to video conference over a year, but not all will take it up because of shyness. Post-16 students are required to do so as part of their Advanced level course and are given timetabled slots. This is partly because post-16 students are more flexible to conference at times that the remote partners were available.

Video conferencing is mapped against all schemes of work in the department and points for formal video conferences are identified.

Mainstreaming

Other departments, such as history, art and geography have had access on an occasional basis. Art for example has used international links with students. The Principal also uses video conferencing for business purposes. One problem with rolling it out to the whole school is cost. Running costs at present come out of the Languages budget. If mainstreaming occurred than the school budget would have to be involved, but then languages would lose the intensity of use that it can guarantee at the moment by controlling and paying for the facility.

Technical issues

The school has had some problems with telephone connectivity, unrelated to video conferencing (contractors dug up the land line), with the result that capacity was restricted for a number of months. Compatibility of systems between the school and the European partners was occasionally problematic, but especially in a situation of flux, for example in considering the move to IP.

Future plans

The school is contemplating whether to move to an ASDL line and are exploring the advantages and disadvantages of this, both in terms of cost and technical issues. While the Principal was keen to develop capacity, he wanted to be sure that a move to IP would lead to an improvement in quality of the video and audio experience for the students. He was willing to put money into this provision, but there were other school developments that impinged upon the ability to do so.

The school sees video conferencing as becoming part of the fabric of language education particularly in relations between European schools, notwithstanding that there is a mis-match between the numbers who wish to interact with English speakers and those who wish to do so with French, German or Spanish speakers. The next target however, will be to embed video conferencing into a global citizenship perspective, with interaction between widely dispersed populations. The strategy adopted will be to 'experiment and evaluate' to find ways of working that will enhance the global awareness of the students.