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Online Conferencing--Tips and Tricks for Effective Use

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Online Conferencing--Tips and Tricks for Effective Use

Abstract

Texas Cooperative Extension (TCE) continues to look for ways to extend professional development opportunities to employees through the use of technology. The most recent technology employed is online conferencing. This article describes programs that have been conducted using online conferencing, discusses specific teaching methodologies used to deliver these learning events, and shares lessons learned.

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Introduction

Texas Cooperative Extension (TCE) has continued to look for ways to extend professional development opportunities to employees through the use of technology, including common and comfortable technologies such as teleconferencing and co-browsing on the Internet (Coppernoll & Stone, 2004). In the spring of 2003, Texas Cooperative Extension adopted the use of Centra Symposium for online conferencing, an evolving technology that allows voice-over-Internet, application sharing, and live interaction. As of January 2006, TCE had delivered more than 1,100 programs via online conferencing. Completion of these programs has resulted in the development of specific teaching methodologies and techniques that can be used to effectively deliver programs using online conferencing.

An Overview of Programs Conducted Using Online Conferencing

Online conferencing seminars have been conducted by TCE in both subject matter and performance or soft skill competency areas. Subject matter seminars have addressed a wide array of topics ranging from nutrition essentials to foreign animal diseases to youth protection standards. Table 1 summarizes by program area the number of subject matter online conferencing events for 2005-2006.

Table 1.
Online Conferencing Events for Subject Matter Areas 2005-2006

Program Area	Number of Events	Number of
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		Participants
Agriculture and Natural Resources	65	489
Family and Consumer Sciences	55	616
4-H and Youth Development	35	326

Online conferencing seminars have also been conducted in performance or soft skill competency areas. Many of these seminars are made available via an ongoing professional development initiative known as "Friday Online." Each Friday morning a 2-hour professional development seminar is offered by an internal support group (i.e., Extension Information Technology, the Extension Unit in the Department of Agricultural Education, Human Resources, or Agricultural Communications). A variety of topics have been offered in the areas, including: program development, education, communications, technology, and human resource development.

In addition, online events have been organized to address topics specific to new employees, agency-wide issues, information technology, and organizational accountability. Online conferencing has also been utilized for meetings and collaboration events instead of previously conducted teleconferences. Table 2 summarizes online conferencing events and meetings related to performance competency areas for 2005-2006.

Table 2.
Online Conferencing Events for Performance Competency Areas 2005-2006

Type of Event	Number of Events	Number of Participants
Friday Online	64	1009
New Employee Events	26	554
Information Technology Training	81	565
Organizational Accountability	95	856
Weekly & Quarterly Meetings	196	1794
Training on Volunteer Management	11	66

Effective Use of Online Conferencing

The use of online conferencing is not new. As shared by Burkhart-Kriesel and Caine (2004), the technology has been available since late 1999. The technology and its usage have changed, though. Many newcomers to online conferencing are pleasantly surprised to realize that activities they might do in a traditional face-to-face environment can also be accomplished online using appropriate tools. There are times when online conferencing is not appropriate (e.g., hands-on-training that requires access to a special laboratory). However, there are times that online conferencing is actually more appropriate than face-to-face, because the instruction can be delivered when it is needed, increasing efficiency and decreasing costs.

Current technology does not allow the face-to-face environment to be entirely replicated online; however, one can often accomplish more online than what is anticipated. While online

conferencing software tools vary depending on the manufacturer, many tools are similar. Table 3 presents activities typically used in TCE face-to-face educational programs along with comparable tools that are being used to deliver the same educational programs via online conferencing.

Table 3.
Comparison of Face-to-Face Activities with Online Conferencing Tools

Typical Face-to-Face Activities	Tools Available via Online Conferencing to Accomplish the Activity
Welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator Voice Over Internet
Introductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator and Participant Voice Over Internet
Icebreaker Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator and Participant Voice Over Internet • Survey Tool
Assess Learner Needs or Question Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator and Participant Voice Over Internet • Survey Tool
Review of Agenda and Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic Agenda Shown in Interface
Slides of Agenda and Objectives	
Lecture or Presentation by Various Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice Over Internet by Facilitator and Multiple Presenters
Presentation Slides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation Slides Shown in Interface
Presentation Animations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slide Markup Tools
Handouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail handouts prior to meeting • Fax handouts to participants • Provide link for participants to download handouts in Interface
Brainstorming Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White Board with One or More Scribes
Large Group Discussion or Q&A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator and Participant Voice Over Internet • Participant Feedback Icons • Text Chat • Anonymous Feedback Tool
Small Group Discussion / Break-out Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text Chat • Break Out Rooms for Small Group with Voice Over Internet Discussions • Participant Feedback Icons • White Board Note-taking in Break-out Rooms

Individual Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handouts • Individual Web Tour • Online Time to Complete or Offline Time to Complete and then Reconvene
Demonstration of Software or Review of Printed Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application Sharing
Showcase of Web Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web Safari or Group Web Touring • Launch a Browser for Individual Tour
Schedule Group Breaks and Unscheduled Individual Breaks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step Out Notification • Scheduled Online Breaks
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic Evaluation

Lessons Learned

Texas Cooperative Extension has learned valuable lessons through active use of online conferencing. These lessons can be summarized into three key areas.

1. **Adoption of the technology should be planned and purposeful.** The use of online conferencing was not widely accepted at first. A dedicated effort was required on the part of TCE administration to model effective use and to provide a means for employees to experience how the technology could be used in a non-threatening environment. Details regarding the strategy employed by TCE can be found in "Facilitating the Adoption of an Online Conferencing System--A Recipe for Success" (Murphrey & Coppernoll, 2006).
2. **Effective learning starts with good instructional design and is followed by good instructor delivery.** The importance of instructional design and instructor delivery cannot be overlooked regardless of the setting, whether the instruction is delivered face-to-face or online. In the traditional face-to-face setting, instructors often turn to lectures as the primary mode of delivery. This is also true in online conferencing. The personal presence that often holds instructors accountable in a face-to-face setting is missing in online conferencing, and this "lack of personal presence" can serve as a barrier to effective delivery. Good instruction requires measurable objectives, planned activities that appeal to various learning styles, and effective facilitation. Online conferencing has the potential to deliver excellent instruction, if the educator uses the tools effectively.
3. **Engaging learners and facilitating discussion via online conferencing is similar to face-to-face settings, but is different in that it requires forethought and skills in delivery without the use of body language and eye contact.** In a face-to-face environment, facial expressions and body language can be used to assess engagement. In an online conferencing environment, assessment of engagement is accomplished via questions to which participants respond through participation tools or voice response. Frequent assessment is important, but questioning must be planned and practiced so as to not be clumsy, awkward, or rhetorical. Face-to-face environments allow the instructor to use his/her body and words to manage the learning environment. The online conferencing environment requires the use of voice and words to manage the environment. Anticipating possible issues can help instructors think through the right words to explain a concept as simply as possible. It is also helpful for instructors to think through how to manage discussions naturally and smoothly without eye contact or nods of the head. This can be accomplished using round robin sharing or raising of hands.

Summary

Online conferencing can provide an effective educational environment for a variety of topics and in a variety of program areas. The tools available for online conferencing allow implementation of activities similar to those in a face-to-face setting. The most successful online conferencing events are those in which educators and learners are comfortable and confident with the technology, the instructional design and delivery is appropriate, and facilitators have developed skills that allow

facilitation without the use of body language and eye contact.

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