NC-NET News

Issue Focus:
TECH TOOLS

Smile When You Say That!

John Chamberlain
NC-NET Academy Facilitator/Senior Associate, Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD)

There was a time when wristwatch video calling was the stuff of science fiction and comic books. But that's not the case today, because such technologies are built in almost every smartphone and computing device. Not only are today's students generally quite comfortable with video connecting, but many professions will likely include videoconferencing as a normal part of day-to-day workplace communications. By including a live video component in our teaching, we can better connect teachers and students, and prepare students with an important employability skill. In my work at CORD, I routinely use a simple desktop or laptop webcam, a smartphone, or conference-room webcam to video-connect with coworkers across the country (literally, from a half-dozen cities, coast to coast). Here I'd like to share some tips for effective videoconferencing using today's internet connectivity.

Schedule the call. Unlike a simple phone call, video connections are best scheduled in advance, especially if several people will be participating. Although technology usually works, be sure everyone knows the "Plan B." Before the meeting, take a few minutes to prepare…

Check your technology. Verify that your camera and microphone are ready to go and functioning. Most computers have separate speaker and microphone volume levels—know how to adjust the levels of both. The microphone may be built into the webcam, part of a headset, or a high-quality USB mic, but be wary of feedback (occurs when the mic picks up the speaker).

Check your surroundings. You will deliver your best videoconference in a quiet, uncluttered, well-lit room. **Sound:** Our ears can amazingly "tune out" background noises (fans, music, machinery, finger tapping, other conversations), but your microphone will pick up and make ALL those sounds part of your call. So, shut your door and find a quiet place. **Lighting:** The camera captures whatever light enters the lens, so be sure that most of that light comes from your face, NOT the bright light or open window behind you (else everyone only sees your silhouette). **Background:** Ask yourself, "What will people see over my shoulder?" Don't allow the background to distract or embarrass you. A blank (or mostly blank) wall works wonderfully.

During the meeting. Unless it's a "webinar" format, all participants are required to connect with audio and video—no lurkers! Everyone should 1) sit close enough to their camera to show a full face, and 2) keep their microphone *muted* unless speaking. If a group conversation ensues, several can be unmuted at once, but participants need to "take turns" or wait to be "called on." A facilitator (e.g., the instructor) might use an agenda, manage questions and answers, and maybe even Mute/Unmute participants. Most videoconferencing apps include the ability to share files, share screens, and even allow others to control another's screen. Such abilities can become powerful and engaging tools for a productive learning session.

After the meeting. Many videoconferencing apps include the ability to **record the meeting,** that is, record the audio and video of the call. If that feature is enabled, you can share the recording (typically via a hyperlink) with the attendees as well as those who were unable to attend.

Example capabilities. Let me briefly summarize some features of one videoconferencing solution that you can explore for FREE. *Zoom.us*, or just **Zoom**, provides high-quality video calling over the Internet for as many as 100 participants meeting up to 40 minutes. (No time limits for two-person calls, or with paid plans.) During a video-meeting, a "gallery view" shows up to 25 connections at one time. Participants can share their screen (a window or whole desktop), write on a whiteboard, or exchange chat messages. The meeting can be joined by telephone (audio only), if necessary. Paid plans include a "polling" capability, as practiced in many webinars.

Using videoconferencing. In my experience, the best start to a videoconferencing component in a course will include at least one face-to-face meeting "in the flesh." While not essential, this seems to promote more trusting and fruitful exchanges in the online video-meetings that follow. Videoconferencing can be used to deliver real time (or even recorded) instruction, trouble-shooting sessions, demonstrations, and even student-led presentations, just to name a few. Other possibilities include extended faculty office hours, peer tutoring sessions, guest speakers (from anywhere in the world), group project meetings, and on and on. The possibilities are almost endless.

While videoconferencing may allow you to connect with distant family and friends, it can also be a powerful addition to your education toolbox—both to deliver relevant and timely instruction and to better prepare students for work in an ever-evolving high-tech world!