

## SECTION E:

# Preparation for the Conference and the Conference itself

### IN THIS SECTION:

**Making arrangements with your partner**

**Preparing pupils/students**

**Preparing the room**

**How to proceed during the conference**

**Good practice tips**



**Having familiarised yourself with the equipment (see Section A and B), done some test links (see Section B), decided how you are going to use video conferencing to support your teaching (Section C) and who you are going to link with (Section D), you'll now be ready to conference in earnest!**

**Here are some guidelines for successful video conferencing.**

## **MAKING ARRANGEMENTS WITH YOUR PARTNER**

- Decide on a date and time for the video conference. It may be difficult to find a mutually convenient time for the link. School timetables will be different, rooms and equipment may not be available when you want them. Engage support from your head teacher, senior management team, technician and other staff. Supportive and enthusiastic colleagues who value video conferencing in the classroom can help overcome some of these problems.
- Ensure all dates, times, mobile phone numbers, contact names and ISDN numbers are exchanged in good time and checked. Use e-mail to confirm arrangements in writing to avoid any errors.
- Check school holiday dates in other regions and countries. Across the UK holidays vary from region to region. Remember, in the southern hemisphere summer is between December and January. In France and Germany school exams begin in May, with the effect that lessons for some pupils do not resume until September.
- If you are working with a partner in a different time zone outside the UK:  
Check time differences - Across the USA there are three time zones (New York is EST, Houston is CDT, California is PST). Australian States also operate different time zones. Remember, planning a conference for 2.00 pm in the UK will mean a presenter in California will have to conference at 6.00 am.  
Some schools in Europe often begin earlier and finish at lunchtime. Be prepared to hold lunchtime and twilight sessions or to change your timetable.  
Be flexible - meet at a convenient time for you on one occasion and an inconvenient time on another. You will find people can be exceptionally accommodating. At the Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia, a colleague even arranged a sleepover event to enable them to take part in a video conference link to the UK.
- Check the age of the pupils and the size of the group you are linking with. Don't be put off if your partner class isn't a perfect match. In practice, perfect matches are rare and sometimes different age groups and abilities can work well together.
- If possible, meet your link teacher/colleague informally, over a video conference, before conferencing with the children/students.
- If you are working with an 'expert' from a museum or education centre, discuss in advance the age and level of the group you are going to work with, the format you wish

the lesson to take and the preparation you need to do. Exchange any relevant materials and information in advance to facilitate the smooth running of the session. If your presenter has a list of questions in advance, the artefacts s/he shows are more likely to match the interests of the pupils.

## PREPARING THE PUPILS/STUDENTS

- A group of pupils will naturally be excited and curious about their first video conference. They will want to talk about how it works, experiment and ask questions. It is worth providing an opportunity for them to try out the technology informally prior to the event so they will be ready to concentrate on the lesson content.  
If your video conference is to include a presentation by the pupils, practise the presentation and use of different camera shots beforehand. You can look at the presentation on an additional monitor or record it on a VCR to check that it can be seen and heard and to help work on stylistic improvements.
- It is also useful to practise your presentation with a 'sympathetic' far-end. Pupils soon become aware of the importance of how they look and sound and will swiftly develop the skills required for successful video conferencing.

There are suggestions about how you might do this in Section B.

## PREPARING THE ROOM AND EQUIPMENT

- Video conferencing is about seeing and hearing. A poor picture can make communication difficult; without sound, your video conference cannot take place at all. It is therefore essential to test your connection before your conference begins. Check the type of system being used at the far-end and arrange an informal test. Technical difficulties can usually be sorted out and adjustments to the physical environment can also be addressed.
- If you are planning to use additional technology such as a camcorder, document camera or laptop as part of the conference, practise using it beforehand.
- Give some thought to arrangements in the room. Plan where your contributors will sit so that movement does not disrupt the flow of the event. Your video conference partners will be more interested in seeing you than your furniture.
- Give some thought to camera shots that you will use during the conference. If you will not be controlling the camera yourself, brief the person who will be.

## INTERACTION IS THE NAME OF THE GAME!

The beauty of video conferencing is that it is interactive. If your educational goals are only 'content', you might decide to use a video recording. Thousands of dollars have been spent producing video recordings on any subject you can imagine. Video conference providers cannot compete with this for sheer content and graphic interest. However, if you want your students to be actively engaged, asking questions and participating in the content, then video conferencing is the next best thing to being there!

In order to maximise this interaction the teacher and provider really have to be a team and the student to teacher ratio has to be small. The more information I have from a teacher about the students' knowledge and interests the better! The best programmes have resulted from small classes where the teacher has sent me a seating chart, a description of the work the students have been doing and some questions the students have on the topic being covered.

Kelli Lewis - Ocean Institute, Dana Point, California, USA

## DURING A CONFERENCE

- Take the time to introduce yourselves to the far-end. Spend a little time on informal conversation to help put the participants at ease before starting the conference 'proper'.
- If the video or audio connection is poor at the start of your conference, it is better to say so early on in the event rather than politely struggle along getting increasingly frustrated. It may be that simple adjustments to lighting and microphone positions are the solution. This is why testing in the early stages is so important and worthwhile. Sometimes hanging up and reconnecting or rebooting the system will solve a poor connection.

During a recent link to NASA and a presentation about globes, maps and the International Space Station, all the pupils really wanted to know was "How does the link work?" "Where is NASA?" "What's the time difference?" and various questions about cultural issues. The presenter answered all the questions in an informal and entertaining way; the children were happy and settled down to the more serious business of the conference.

- \* **WHAT ARE THEY HEARING AT THE OTHER END?**  
It is important to speak slowly, deliberately and clearly. Remember that strong regional accents may cause problems for far-end participants, so 'slow down'.
- \* **WHAT ARE THEY SEEING AT THE OTHER END?**

Use your camera controls to adjust the image you transmit during the video conference. Sitting at a table is often a conference choice, but don't sit too far from the camera. The people at the other end of the conference want to see who they're talking to, not a silhouetted solitary figure at the farthest end of a very long table. When in close up, ensure you are presenting head and shoulder shots - not the top of the head, chin, chest or the back of the head!

When a discussion is taking place with a number of speakers, there is a number of facilities which can enhance your conference. If your system has pre-sets, take the time to set the camera position to selected positions beforehand

Alternatively, it might be helpful to have a camcorder attached to the video conference system. The camera operator can use the camcorder for the close up shots of speakers and the fixed camera for the group shots, cutting between the two as necessary using the remote control. This cuts out the camera movement there would have to be if only the fixed camera was being used, and the consequent 'break-up' of sound this sometimes causes. But it does require someone who can operate a camera and knows how and when to switch between cameras.

- The whole purpose of video conferencing is to interact. If you want to interrupt or pose an additional question, take the opportunity to do so.
- Remember, when you are video conferencing, even when there are a number of other participants, you can be seen at any time!
- If possible, consider having a second monitor in the room beside the video conference monitor. The pupils can see themselves on the second monitor and be aware how they are presenting themselves.

In one conference, a school forgot that they could be seen and, after their contribution, they took the time to break for lunch while another school was giving their presentation. This particular piece of bad manners reflected badly on the students taking part. While you are connected to the conference you should behave as if you are in the same room as your colleagues, even though you might be miles apart.

- Pupils need to listen to any questions they might be asked. On one occasion, the question asked by the presenter was repeated by the teacher in the class, answered by a pupil and relayed by the teacher back to the presenter. This seemed a complete waste of valuable time. If the pupils had been trained to listen and respond directly to the far-end this could have been avoided. Remember this is interactive video conferencing.
- To help remote learners participate and feel included, relate directly to them by looking directly into the video camera. This will help all users feel included and not just passive viewers.
- Too much background movement, hand waving and fidgeting will only distract and might cause the picture to blur. A quick demonstration or practice during an informal session can help keep movement to a minimum.
- Avoid talking over each other. Wait for a moment before responding.
- It is often good practice to mute the microphone when you are not talking.

- Passing the remote control round the group can encourage concentration. The individual taking control of the system can move the camera to find themselves, or use the relevant preset camera position before contributing to the conversation.

On one occasion involving four schools in a multipoint link, an 'open' mike ruined the conference as the camera repeatedly jumped to a noisy site. This situation was compounded by the constant feedback, which drowned out the sound of the presenter. Remember to make appropriate use of your mute button to avoid these problems and test your audio beforehand.

- Maintain enthusiasm. It is important when video conferencing to ensure that all participants are engaged. Make regular use of interaction and perhaps break down a long conference into a number of short conferences with breaks.
- When you become fully involved in a discussion or presentation, you begin to feel the people you are talking to are with you in your classroom. If you subsequently meet them face to face, you will find you are quite comfortable and at ease because you have in fact already 'met' each other!

A lot of this may seem obvious, but most people involved in video conferencing will have a story about arriving for a conference unprepared, with the equipment still in the box, remote controls without batteries, pupils arriving late, wrong phone numbers and so on.

With preparation and practice, video conferencing becomes a very exciting classroom resource. Without them, teachers can become frustrated and critical of yet another piece of technology

## GOOD PRACTICE TIPS

Enthusiastic and motivated teachers and their school partners can develop all kinds of exciting projects using video conferencing as a communications resource in the classroom.

However, there are a few basic and fairly obvious good practice tips which will enable your school to enjoy successful video conferencing links. Many a video conference has faltered because of personal communication errors, or because someone didn't include something as basic as writing down the international dialling code in the planning process.

Today's video conferencing equipment is very reliable. Surprisingly, most video conferencing failures are attributable to **human error** rather than technical failure.

For success, you must ensure that your personal communication skills are thoroughly and securely in place.

- Make sure your details are on the Global Leap directory, <http://www.global-leap.com> and are up to date and accurate. No one will be able to contact you or work with you if your details are incorrect!

- Make sure your partner school has your correct email address. **Write it down** accurately and send it to them. Don't rely on telephone messages alone.
- Please regularly check and read the emails sent to the address you have given to your partner. **Always** include your telephone number and identify who you are and where your school is located when emailing your colleagues. You can't expect anyone to bother replying to a vague email from an unidentified source!
- Confirm times, dates, and telephone numbers in writing (and check!)  
A missing or incorrect digit will mean failure - you would be amazed how often this simple error occurs! Include international dialling codes.
- Have you checked if there is a bar on international calls from your school. Don't rely on what someone else "thinks". Check it yourself.
- Can you make **and** receive calls from your school?
- Quote all times clearly in GMT. Calculate and allow for international time differences. Use the facility on [www.global-leap.com](http://www.global-leap.com) (Click On - Meeting Planner/ Time Zones, look for the icon of the alarm clock). Remember **British Summer Time** is GMT +1. Always quote times and identify them in both UK times, and whatever the other zone time is. (By writing, "We will test at 12:00 GMT, which is 07:00 EST" you will avoid any confusion on the part of the recipient of your message.)
- Write down the day and date in full, e.g. Monday April 3rd 2003 (in the USA this would be written 4/3/03 which can potentially lead to huge confusion and missed opportunities).
- Make a quick test call to [www.global-leap.com](http://www.global-leap.com) ISDN Automated Test Facility 020 8868 8963 or IP 80.68.35.5 to check **your** outgoing connectivity is working. (Your partner can do this too.) Note this will only confirm that YOU are receiving audio and video. A direct live test with your partner is also advisable. Don't assume people have their systems switched on all day just for your convenience. Make clear prior arrangements with your partner about a mutually convenient time to test.
- Make a brief telephone call 5 minutes before the video conference link to check systems are switched on and that everything is ready.
- One designated person must have their mobile phone **switched on** in the video conferencing location in case of technical difficulties. This will avoid having to resort to frantic hand signals, felt tip pens and bits of paper if the audio is not working. (A fixed telephone at the other end of the building is of no use on these occasions unless you are really fast on your feet!) It is frustrating for all concerned to watch your far-end sitting waiting for something to happen, with their mobile phone on the desk in front of them but switched off!
- Do the batteries in your handset work! Have you got spare ones?
- Has someone wandered off with your remote control?
- Don't sit the group in front of a bright light source or large window with no curtains or blinds. If you do, all your partner will see is dark silhouettes and no faces. Check that the image you are sending to your partner doesn't include your ceiling tiles, light fittings and furniture, but unfortunately misses out the heads and shoulders of the participants. Use your picture in picture facility and adjust the camera angle slightly.
- Have you sent your partner a seating plan and the names of the pupils taking part in the conference? This is especially important if your pupils have unusual or similar sounding names. You can spend embarrassing minutes asking people to repeat their names - and still get them wrong!

- Is the air-conditioning or heating system so loud that no one can hear what you're saying? Test the microphone from where the pupils are sitting, not from where the teacher is standing. This is particularly important when setting up a room where a class of younger children may be sitting on the floor but the microphone has been positioned somewhere high up, or even on the ceiling.
- Do you always receive telephone messages left at your school office? Is the office closed or the switchboard unmanned at certain times of the day?
- Always follow up and confirm important information left by telephone messages with a written email or snail mail. Copy **all** the people involved in the planning process for your VC event into your email communication.
- Can someone cover for you in an emergency? It is a shame to have to cancel on the day because one person is delayed or sick.
- Remember, too many failed video conferences and your partner may give up and look for a more reliable school to work with. Try not to waste each others time. Try to be flexible and accommodate each other's timetable needs.
- Remember to say **thank you** and give constructive feed-back and follow-up after your conference.
- And FINALLY if the very worst happens and the event is unavoidably cancelled, do have the courtesy to contact your partner with an apology and explanation. If you don't, you really can't expect them to want to work with you again. They will find another more reliable school.

Remember good manners apply to video conference meetings just as they do in other types of meetings or partnerships.

Please don't let this list put you off. Although it has been compiled from **real experiences**, now that you know what **can** go wrong, you won't make the same mistakes yourself!

Most video conferences go really well and everyone involved finds their partnership rewarding, exciting and motivating.

If you do need a little help and advice we can try and help.

[www.global-leap.com](http://www.global-leap.com)