

Chapter XIX

Integrating Videoconferencing into the Classroom: A Perspective from Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will focus largely on the author's experiences in promoting the creative use of videoconferencing in schools in Northern Ireland (NI) over the past ten years. It will also describe certain groundbreaking projects that educators in other parts of the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland have undertaken in this field. Although until recently there has been little in the way of a systemic approach in Northern Ireland to the introduction and integration of videoconferencing into K-12 classrooms, there have been some striking examples of good practice. The examples chosen demonstrate the potential of videoconferencing to be inclusive of different needs and learning styles, and to extend and enrich the learning experiences available in the classroom. They are intended to show how videoconferencing can have a powerful effect on learning and teaching, and to give more educators the motivation and confidence to explore and develop this user-friendly valuable education resource.

BACKGROUND

In the mid-nineties in Northern Ireland (NI), new education technologies were emerging as potentially powerful educational tools, and were beginning to make their way into the K-12 classroom. The focus was almost exclusively on computers and computer networking. In 1997, the Northern Ireland Department of Education (DE), which is responsible for education policy in Northern Ireland and which provides 100% funding for both capital and recurrent expenditure in all schools, drew up an Education Technology strategy in which it committed to a ten-year technology development program in schools and to providing the funding necessary for implementation. This strategy was revised and updated in 2004 (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2004). A body, known as Classroom 2000 (C2k), was established and funded by the Department of Education to deliver to schools a high-quality, sustainable infrastructure, connectivity, and resources which meet strategic targets. C2k works with a wide range of partners from both private and public sectors to deliver an integrated and supported service, which is installed, maintained and upgraded by specialist providers. As a result of a massive investment by government, all 1,200 schools in NI had, by 2004, and at no cost to themselves, a common infrastructure of networked computers connected to the Internet and linked to legacy systems; a computer-to-student ratio of close to 1:5; a local area network (LAN), bringing curriculum and administration systems together, with a fast-filtered Internet access at every workstation; broadband connectivity; connection to a NI Data Center, providing always-on, protected access to an online learning environment containing content and assessment services for the school curriculum, professional development, administration, and management needs; 200 nationally-licensed curriculum titles, greatly enhancing the digital resource available for teaching and learning; an individual password,

mailbox, and protected area for all 400,000 NI school service users, including all pupils; and a fast, direct link to the People's Network in all public libraries (where free broadband access is also provided). As a result, historic issues of equity of access and opportunity, affordability, sustainability, and the central provision of reliable systems have been addressed and resolved; however, videoconferencing technology was not included in the initial rollout of the technology infrastructure.

In addition to infrastructure provision, a major training program has taken place, following a funding initiative throughout the United Kingdom, beginning in 1998, when Lottery funds were made available to support teachers and school librarians in the use of information and communications technology (ICT). As a result, more than 20,000 teachers (almost the entire teaching force) and school librarians in NI took part in the training program aimed at improving their expertise in using technology for pedagogical purposes. This program did not include any training related to videoconferencing.

The use of videoconferencing at that time was limited, and was generally confined to higher education. This was true of the United Kingdom in general; videoconferencing had little impact in the K-12 classroom. In Ireland, its use was confined mainly to schools involved in the European Studies Project. This project was established in 1986 and funded by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland. Its aim was to use technology, including videoconferencing, to increase mutual understanding, awareness, and tolerance among students and teachers on the island of Ireland and across Europe. It was through my involvement in this project that I first experienced videoconferencing and became aware of its potential to offer authentic, beyond-the-classroom learning experiences to K-12 students and teachers. I began to explore this technology through a wide range of pilot

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