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# A Beginner's Guide to Intercultural Videoconferencing

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*This paper presents a personal account of setting up a videoconference project to allow students who are unable to travel abroad the opportunity to “meet” face-to-face with their peers anywhere in the world. Various kinds of videoconferencing hardware and software available are introduced and suggestions for and pitfalls to a successful virtual intercultural interaction are delineated. Collaborative activities conducted through e-mail prior to the videoconference provide students at both institutions the opportunity for intercultural learning while simultaneously helping to foster*

*relationship building. While a virtual international experience is not as rewarding as the experience of actually going abroad, with careful planning and extra effort, it can be a very exciting way to give students an intercultural perspective.*

発表者の経験上から述べると、海外に行けない学生もビデオ会議プロジェクトを用いれば、自国にいながらにして世界各地の仲間と顔を見ながらリアルタイムで話をする事が可能になる。本発表ではビデオ会議プロジェクトを立ち上げるにあたり、その長所と短所について検討する。現在利用可能な多種多様なビデオ会議用ハードおよびソフトを紹介し、ビデオによる異文化交流を成功させるために陥りやすい問題点を挙げつつ、様々な提案を行いたい。両校の学生はビデオ会議に先立ち、Eメールによる共働活動を通して、異文化を学び、またお互いの関係を構築することができる。仮想の異文化体験は、本物の海外体験にはもちろん及ばないが、十分な計画と準備を行えば、学生に異文化に対する視点を持たせる画期的な方策になり得る。

## Videoconferencing introduction

Today more colleges and universities are recognizing the value of incorporating international/ intercultural education into the curriculum. However, the economic situation in Japan, combined with fear of terrorism and SARS, is making it difficult for many institutions to either afford, or commit to, expensive overseas programs for their students. There is another option. With the help of technology, students can have a “virtual” intercultural experience. They can “meet” with their peers anywhere in the world for real-time, face-to-face conversations without leaving home. However, there are many considerations for teachers who

wish to effectively incorporate videoconferencing into the language classroom. The following account of one professor's attempts at videoconferencing illustrates many of the pros and cons to effective use of this technology. Those new to videoconferencing will find help to get started. Experienced *videoconferencers* will find ideas and resources to help improve the quality of their videoconferencing.

## Equipment

First, equipment costs need to be weighed against the numbers of students one wishes to involve in a videoconference. Room-based systems are quite expensive, both to purchase and to operate. However, they allow large numbers of students to participate at once because of their high-quality video. Desktop systems interact directly with a personal computer, are very inexpensive nowadays (beyond the initial computer cost), and are virtually free to operate. However, they are designed for one-person use and are unsuitable for a conference room call. They also require direct access to a high-speed Internet connection.

I first learned about videoconferencing from the book *Recipes for Wired Teachers* (JALT CALL, 2000) and became excited about the potential for using videoconferencing in my classroom. I immediately bought a webcam, a microphone, and Macintosh-compatible software, and tried to get it to work, to no avail.

## Internet connection

I found out the hard way that my school, Matsuyama Shinonome College (MSC), has a Firewall in place, and they will not allow faculty access through it. (Firewall is a generic term used to describe a variety of security measures used to safeguard Internet

and network connections.) Home Internet connections do not usually have Firewalls, but until recently, they also did not have the bandwidth required for videoconferencing. Many online students still depend on dial-up modems that cannot process video data quickly. Even where higher speed connections are available, some institutions may restrict access.

Last year I finally subscribed to a high-speed Internet service at home, but I still had a problem. Until recently nearly all computer-based videoconferencing software (such as the freeware *NetMeeting* and *CU-SeeMe*--now called *CUWorld*) worked with Windows computers only. I could not find any Mac compatible videoconferencing freeware, so I purchased *VideoLink Pro*, which was advertised as cross-platform, and both *NetMeeting* and Macintosh compatible. I soon found out it was neither. It would only work with another *registered VideoLink Pro* user, and I could not find anyone using it.

## Videoconferencing systems

The only way my school was able to set up a videoconference with our sister school was via a room-based PictureTel 2000 system that included two monitors, two cameras, a microphone, and the computer interface. When we held our videoconference, MSC did not possess a PictureTel system, so we rented the videoconferencing room at the Prefectural Convention Hall.

After the videoconference, MSC purchased its own PictureTel 2000 system, but we have never had an opportunity to use it. Our sister school gave their equipment away after their Freeman Foundation Grant expired. They felt the equipment was too expensive to maintain if no one else were footing the bill. None of the schools we are affiliated with is using the PictureTel

system. MSC should have located partners with the equipment before investing in such expensive hardware.

The PictureTell 2000 utilizes six phone lines to transmit sound and images, so the cost of a videoconference is approximately six times that of an international phone call. For reference, the room rental was only ¥2,380, but the telephone toll for a 90 minute videoconference was ¥31,000 (paid for with a grant from the Freeman Foundation). Though considerably less expensive than traveling abroad, it is still expensive, especially when one considers that a videoconference can now be held for next to nothing, using a home computer and the new software that is now available.

## Software

In 2003 both Microsoft and Apple incorporated audio and video into their popular chat programs now called *MSN Messenger 6* and *iChat AV* respectively. *MSN Messenger 6* is free and can be downloaded from the Internet; *iChat AV* is included with *Mac OS X Panther 10.3*, or it can be purchased separately for users of *Mac OS X Jaguar 10.2.5* and above. It also requires a Mac. com account.

I found Apple's *iChat AV* software worked amazingly well. Patience is required, but in truth, most of the problems we encountered were not the fault of the software.

I only have direct experience with *iChat AV*. However, Pogue (2003) compares the two programs. The chat window in *MSN Messenger 6* is always open and the screen is full of flashy extras (games, smiley faces, backgrounds). As a result, the video size is quite small. In *iChat AV*, even when the video is as

big as your screen, it is still crisp and clear, but one needs a G4 computer with FireWire.

## Cameras and microphones

While *MSN Messenger 6* will work with any U.S.B golf-ball webcam, *iChat AV* requires a video camera with FireWire (even an ordinary digital camcorder will work). My webcam worked immediately when I plugged it in to my Mac. I didn't need any wizards or additional set-up that Windows computers often require.

Additionally most computers, Mac or Windows, come with built-in microphones (the iSight camera comes with two built-in microphones), but built-in microphones don't come with on/off switches. An external microphone helps reduce background noise, and it can be turned off without disconnecting from the videoconference if the need arises for a private comment to someone in the room.

## Partners

Once a decision is made on the equipment, a videoconferencing partner is necessary. There are a number of websites to assist with finding a video-chat partner.

### Useful Internet Sites:

iChat AV: <http://apple.com/ichat/>

MSN Messenger 6: <http://messenger.msn.com>

CUWorld: <http://www.cuworld.com/>

NetMeeting: <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting/>

**Websites to help MSN Messenger 6 users:**

<http://communities.msn.com/TheNetMeetingZone/>  
 Netmeeting Zone: <http://archive.devx.com/netmeeting/>  
 The Global Schoolhouse: <http://www.gsn.org>

**Websites to help iChat AV users:**

<http://IChatters.com>  
<http://www.ichatfinder.com>  
<http://www.seeser.org>  
<http://ichattin.com>

Registered users of the *Global SchoolNet Foundation* can access their list of participating schools, and requests for a videoconference partner are distributed to more than 2000 educators around the globe. However, they use Windows based software, and as a Mac person, I don't do Windows.

**Time zones**

Time differences are another important consideration when choosing a videoconferencing partner. As a result of the time difference between Japan and California, the videoconference with our sister school had to begin at 9:00 am on a Saturday (5:00 pm Friday, Pacific Daylight time). Unfortunately, the American students were not especially eager to give up their Friday evenings, so it was difficult to find a group of students willing to participate. I suspect the students were paid to participate in the program; once the grant money ran out, the students did too.

**Other drawbacks**

The most serious drawback to our videoconference was the lack of communication afterward. Prior to the videoconference, there had been many emails back and forth across the Pacific, and the videoconference itself was wonderful. My students were excited about making new friends, but as soon as we disconnected they never heard from their new "friends" again. My students were hurt and I could not explain why there was no more communication from the American side, even though our sister school had been the one to request follow-up letters. If a protocol is agreed upon, both partners should follow it.

We did not have this problem with our second videoconferencing partner because we had not set a protocol beforehand. Our biggest problem with Ohio State University was the time difference. When it is 9:00 am in Ohio (summer time), it is 10 pm in Japan. There is no way to conduct a videoconference unless some participants are willing to stay up late or get up early.

The videoconference took place in my home. Students came for dinner then watched a video while waiting for the Ohio students to arrive. We finally connected at 10:30 pm, and the students chatted for over two hours. The disadvantage of having students in the home so late at night is that it might interfere with family life.

This second videoconference was just a test run to see if the software would work, and it worked beautifully. However, the videoconference could have been better. The Ohio teachers and I did not discuss any protocol for the conference or prepare warm-up activities to help students break the ice, but I was amazed that it was the American students who were shy to the

point of speechlessness. My students were not afraid to speak at all. They even joked with the American students (and teased the one who confessed to having five girlfriends).

## Enhancing the potential of a videoconference to foster intercultural understanding

Perhaps the American students were shy because they were beginning learners of Japanese and they did not have enough vocabulary. My students felt confident because they were in the “teacher” role and were able to speak in their native language, but when the conversation broke down, they just switched to English and continued. It was wonderful to watch. However, if videoconferencing is to be incorporated into the language classroom, some guidelines and warm-up activities will greatly enhance students’ intercultural understanding and contribute to the effective and efficient use of broadcast time. Pitzer College offers the following guidelines:

### Videoconference guidelines

- *Provide cultural context* through films on culture or website research.
- *Provide personal connection.* Email introductions help introverted students break the ice.
- *Discuss the protocol* for the session with participants at the remote site prior to the videoconference. Make sure both sides have opportunities to ask and answer questions.
- *Anticipate* periods of silence in the conversation. Be patient with students who need time to think.
- *Be Respectful* even if you strongly disagree with the other’s point of view.
- *Resist* the tendency to interpret the other’s verbal and

nonverbal actions from your culture’s perspective.

- *Discuss* with students the cross-cultural differences they encounter.
- *Follow up* with student email impressions of the videoconference.

### Letter of introduction to American students

Write a letter about yourself. Use the answers to the following questions as a starting point. Add any additional information you wish, for example, information about your job, your hobbies, or what you like to do in your free time.

- Letters should have salutations and closings.
- The body of the letter should be in paragraph form with acceptable topic sentences and supporting details.
- Be careful to end each sentence with a period.

1. What is your full name? (explain which name is your family name and which is your first name)
2. Where are you from? (city and country)
3. What languages do you speak?
4. What is the name of your college? The name of your department?
5. What are your favorite school subjects?

When you have finished writing about yourself, think about what subject you would like to discuss with your videoconference partner, and add some questions on this subject to your letter of introduction.

Check your paragraph for correct format, punctuation, spelling and capitalization.



## Pre-conference activity:

Prior to the videoconference with our sister school, I worked with my students to help clarify their self-introductions, and the improvements are evident (see Figures 1 & 2). Unfortunately, no one sat down with the American students and corrected their grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Their letters were *not* good examples of English writing. Email is too casual.

**Figure 1. First draft of student introductory letter**

Hi, What's up? My name is Mami from JAPAN, Shinonome college. Nice to meet you! What is your hobby? I like wake boarding, going to gum, watching American movie, listening to music, gardening and so on. I think I want to speak English fluency. My part time job is caddie. It began to May. It is very hard work. But salary is good. I want to go to USA again. So I must work. How about you? Do you have a part time job? I major in department of communication and culture. I want to become Japanese teacher in a foreign country. In the future what do you want to do?

### Topics

1. children cruelty
2. family violence
3. boy's law
4. HVI
5. gay
6. drug
7. food of style
8. about study
9. about upbringing
10. sexual education

**Figure 2. Final draft of student letter**

Hi. What's up? My name is Mami. I'm from JAPAN. Nice to meet you! I go to Shinonome College. I am in the Department of Communication and Culture. I want to speak English fluently, so I must study hard. I want to work as a Japanese teacher in a foreign country someday, but first I will be a volunteer Japanese teacher in Japan. In the future what do you want to do?

What is your hobby? I like wake boarding, going to the gym, watching American movies, listening to music, gardening, and so on.

My new part time job is apprentice golf caddie. I work at Sunset Hills Golf Course, and I am studying about golf. I began this job this month. It is very hard work, so I don't like it, but the salary is good. I want to quit, but I also want to go to the USA again, so I must work.

I went to Oregon for three weeks when I was a high school student, and I experienced a homestay. I had wonderful time. I have also gone to Los Angeles four times—two times to Pitzer College to study English and American Culture. The first time I was there was very good, but the second time the study was very hard, but I think it was a good experience.

How about you? Do you have a part time job? Have you ever been abroad? If yes, where did you go, and what did you do?

**Figure 2 (cont.)**

I am interested in the following topics. How about you? Do you want to talk about any of the following topics when we have the tele-video conference on June 23?

1. Child abuse
2. Laws that affect juveniles
3. Gay culture: How open is America?
4. A comparison of Japanese food and American food
5. Child education, for example who is responsible for sex education? Parents or schools?
6. Family violence or domestic violence
7. HIV
8. drug abuse problems
9. How long do American students study after school and in class?

I am looking forward to meeting you on June 23.  
See you then. Take care,  
Mami

### **Troubleshooting**

Technology can be frustrating. It is essential to allow time for things that might go wrong. Even though the equipment is very low-tech and easy to use, it is advisable to do a test run before students are involved. The first time we tried to conduct a videoconference with students, the conference center failed to provide a technician to run the equipment. We tried for over an hour to connect and finally went home very disappointed.

There was a severe storm and lightning hit the telephone box at the hall the day of our second attempt. The third time was the proverbial charm. Everything worked wonderfully.

### **Performance tips**

- **Remain seated:** To reduce distractions, students should remain seated during the videoconference. Rapid movements will pixilate the image, as will clothing with busy patterns (such as paisley, plaids, or tartans). Try as they might, webcams are not yet able to focus on small patterns. Dark, solid colors work best. Light colors wash out on camera.
- **Camera position:** The position of the camera is also very important. Students often find it difficult to ask questions, especially when they must get the attention of a stranger on a TV screen. Eye contact helps make students feel comfortable, but many webcams are designed to sit next to the computer. If participants must look sideways to talk into the camera, they can't see the other person's face on their screen. It is best to position the camera as close to the computer screen as possible.
- **Lighting:** The light source should be in front and overhead so that faces are illuminated. Natural or incandescent lighting is best. Fluorescent light causes skin tones to look wan.
- **Background chatter:** Background noise can interfere with a conversation, particularly when using a built-in microphone. Likewise, background movement can pixilate the screen or cause the camera to focus on the movement.

### **In conclusion**

While no one suggests that a virtual international experience will be as rewarding as the experience of actually traveling abroad, with careful planning and extra effort, it can be a very

exciting way to give students an intercultural perspective. W.B. Yeats once said “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.” It is invigorating to see this fire light up in students as they “get the picture” and experience the thrill of communication in English, face-to-face, for the first time.

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