

“Drive-by English”: Teaching College English to High School Students via Interactive TV

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This paper outlines challenges in and essential criteria for the success of dual-credit or concurrent-enrollment writing and literature courses delivered via interactive video technology and suggests specific strategies for administrators, instructors, and classroom facilitators regarding student selection, appropriate technology, and classroom management.

Concurrent enrollment or dual-credit programs, in which high-school seniors may take introductory college courses to earn both high school and college credit, have long been popular in many states, but recent cutbacks in funding for public education, coupled with rising enrollments, have made such programs even more attractive as schools find themselves lacking sufficient staff to meet the needs of their students. And with advent of distance-education technology such as interactive video, students in more and more schools are able to take advantage of college courses. The increased numbers, however welcome they may be to college administrators, bring with them burdens that many college instructors and high school students are unaccustomed to, especially in the case of introductory writing courses, as evinced in the following comments from high school students enrolled in Utah State University’s English 1010 class, Introduction to Academic Writing, which is broadcast throughout the state over the EdNet system of interactive video:

EdNet classes are a challenge because of how they are set up, but once you get past the technical stuff, it was a good class.

The only problem, which is every EdNet course’s problem, is the lack of audible communication. The delay and possible timeouts can cause a person to not even bother.

I feel taking the class over EdNet, while it may have been a good opportunity, may have adversely affected my education.

I feel the teacher would make an excellent educator live but over distance education half the course material is missed due to circumstances outside her control and outside our control as students. English 1010 is a class that is difficult enough that it shouldn’t be taught via EdNet at the high school level.

Mak[e] the electronic equipment usable. Get rid of the three-second long microphone delay. Thank you for my drive-by English education.

The frustration that both students and instructors report with the unavoidable vagaries of available distance-education technology has caused some educators to argue that teaching first-year composition as an interactive-video (ITV) course necessarily violates sound pedagogical principles and consequently should be done only under strict limitations if at all. Since Utah State University–Uintah Basin is

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one of the leading institutions in Utah in delivering college courses to high schools throughout the state, our English instructors are regularly called upon to teach introductory composition and literature courses to classes containing as many as a hundred students at up to ten sites scattered across an area extending to and in some cases crossing the

Arizona, Nevada, Wyoming, and Idaho state lines. The authors of this article have experienced both the rewards and the frustrations of teaching under these circumstances and yet maintain that while the concerns expressed by skeptics are legitimate, introductory college writing and literature courses can be successfully delivered to high school seniors by means of ITV systems if certain essential criteria are consistently adhered to by administrators, instructors, classroom facilitators, and students. Otherwise, students enrolled in distance-education courses may well regard the experience as nothing more than “drive-by English.”

The Technology

Some definition of the phrase “interactive video” may be in order here, as several varieties of this technology are in use in educational systems throughout the country. The competing systems can be divided according to reciprocity: two-way audio and video versus two-way audio with one-way video (students can see the instructor but the instructor cannot see the students)—or according to transmission technology: broadcast versus Internet. USU–Uintah Basin employs combinations of all four methods: satellite classes (broadcast transmission, two-way audio but one-way video), EdNet (broadcast, two-way audio and video) and PolyCom (Internet transmission, two-way audio and video). First-year composition courses at USU–Uintah Basin are delivered via EdNet or PolyCom, except to certain schools that can receive only satellite transmissions. USU also offers several sections of English 1010 as fully online courses, though not to concurrent-enrollment students at present. And although online composition courses have been the subject of much recent scholarly scrutiny, very little has been written about using ITV to teach composition, and even less about using ITV to teach composition to concurrent-enrollment students.

The Research

Of the handful of articles on the subject we have located, only three address the first topic, and of those, only two address the second. Joyce Magnatto Neff's "From a Distance: Teaching Writing on Interactive Television" provides a well-researched analysis of the author's experience with an interactive-video-based first-year composition course, albeit one that did not involve concurrent-enrollment students. The courses discussed in Phyllis Surrency Dallas, Nancy Bishop Dessommes, and Ellen H. Hendrix's "The Distance Learning Classroom: Pedagogical and Administrative Concerns" and in Dawn Rodrigues's "Models of Distance Education for Composition: The Role of Interactive Video Conferencing" were delivered via ITV to both concurrent-enrollment and traditional students. All three articles, however, raise questions and concerns that have also arisen in the courses taught by the present authors, and all three suggest courses of action that coincide with many of the recommendations offered in this paper.

Rodrigues, Neff, and Dallas and her colleagues concur that ITV is not the optimal technology for teaching composition. Rodrigues writes:

Anyone who is experienced at teaching writing in a computer-supported classroom will wonder why I agreed to teach a Distance Learning Class in an Interactive Video format. Clearly, it is not the technology I would have chosen as the primary means of communication with the remote site, nor is a classroom in which only the teacher has a computer an ideal environment for teaching writing. ("Teaching")

For Neff and for Dallas, Dessommes, and Hendrix, as for Rodrigues, one of the chief problems of using ITV to teach writing is the inherent difficulty of adapting a course as interaction-dependent as composition to a technology designed for the lecture format:

For faculty in most disciplines, televised instruction poses little inherent difficulty because it supports traditional methods of delivering education—lecture, discussion, examination. But writing teachers have long since rejected that banking model [. . .] to embrace workshops, peer groups, conferences, and portfolios—highly interactive methods that depend on a close relationship between writers and readers, students and teachers. (Neff 136–37)

Rodrigues concurs: "If the students have taken another class in the ITV medium, chances are likely that the other instructor has taught using a lecture mode, thus making it difficult for a student-centered teacher to validate a different model of instruction that invites—even insists—that students take an active role in the course" ("Teaching"). And immediately after Georgia Southern University administrators

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added English composition courses to the distance-education curriculum, Dallas, Dessommes, and Hendrix observe, “We writing instructors began to notice the difficulty of implementing standard pedagogical practices in a technological classroom [. . .]. The accepted underpinnings of the composition class—group work, peer response, and conferences between teacher and student—suddenly became problematic” (1). Our own experience entirely bears out the reservations cited here. In our live classes we rarely stand behind the desk or lectern, but move freely about the classroom, encouraging students to participate in class discussions, mingling with students while engaged in group work and peer reviews, and looking at individual student writing during in-class exercises. None of this is possible with ITV, unless one is fortunate enough to also have live students enrolled in the class, whereas all of these activities are possible, at least virtually, in an online course.

The Rationale

These difficulties immediately raise the question, “Given the evident superiority of online to ITV delivery for composition courses, why would anyone use the latter?” The answer is simple: many high schools in rural areas lack either the financial resources or the classroom space to make

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computers accessible to all their students at all times, and therefore ITV is the only feasible delivery method in these areas. It comes down to a choice between making the courses available by means of an admittedly problematic technology and not making them available at all. USU and other institutions have chosen to meet the needs of a diverse public by employing diverse technologies, and while

we would like to see more students given the opportunity to take advantage of online writing instruction, in the meantime we do the best we can with what we have available.

It would be disingenuous to pretend that distance-education programs are driven solely by the desire of university administrators to fulfill their mandate of public education: economic factors are at least as influential. Old Dominion University’s Teletechnet interactive-video system boasts cost savings of \$800.00 per student, according to a study quoted by Neff (138–39).¹

At USU–Uintah Basin, concurrent enrollment accounts for approximately half of overall student contact hours, with the largest numbers of those students being served via ITV. And since first-year composition is required for nearly all students, it is no wonder that administrators are keen to offer the course to as many schools in as many regions as possible. But while doing so is financially attractive to administrators, academic departments have serious reservations about whether it can ever be pedagogically sound, and thus arises the clash between administrative and academic priorities highlighted by Dallas, Dessommes, and Hendrix:

Whereas we as classroom teachers and our immediate academic administrators [. . .] are concerned about the pedagogical issues associated with class size, number of sites, and methodology, the distance education administration [. . .] seems to be more interested in promoting a positive image for distance learning by augmenting the number of participating sites and remote populations. (2)

A similar conflict exists at USU, where English department administrators have been attempting to reduce the size of live, online, and broadcast classes to allow for more one-on-one interaction between instructors and students, even as distance-ed administrators expand the number of sites and students to which first-year composition is delivered. Academic administrators, and presumably distance-ed administrators, agree with Dallas and her colleagues that the goal of distance-ed composition courses is “to provide the remote-site and local-site students the same pedagogically sound writing experience” (2). But writing instructors who are charged with meeting this goal find significant obstacles, as attested by all the articles cited here.

Benefits and Burdens

In assessing the results of our experience with distance-ed composition at USU–Utah Basin, we have identified distinct benefits and burdens of the program. Benefits include:

- > providing access to advanced writing and literature courses for qualified seniors who might not otherwise have such opportunities,
- > providing students the opportunity to interact with diverse communities of writers,
- > allowing instructors to work with some highly gifted writers whom they might not otherwise encounter,
- > allowing instructors to employ advanced technology with minimal training, and
- > financial benefits for both partners in the program.

Among the burdens are the following:

- > the sheer numbers instructors must manage (not only in correcting papers, but in faxing and mailing assignments, answering e-mail questions, and so on),
- > lack of personal interaction between instructors and students,
- > tight turnaround time in grading and returning papers, and
- > the unavoidable vagaries of the available technology.

Judging from the comments expressed by Rodrigues, Dallas and her colleagues, and Neff, our perceptions of these benefits and burdens are not unique: among the advantages of ITV cited by Rodrigues are the opportunity for students not only to pursue higher education and to take courses not offered locally, but to interact with students of varied backgrounds and interests and instructors with diverse pedagogical approaches (“Teaching”); likewise, a survey conducted by Dallas, Dessommes,

and Hendrix indicates that their distance-education students “enjoy interacting with the new faces and new ideas of students at other sites since many [. . .] have been in classes with the same students for many years” (4). And Neff quotes her graduate assistant as reporting after a site visit that “[t]he community the students formed at the sites is a possible support/asset to their writing. They learned to see each other as friends and colleagues and thus were able to develop their writing identities in close connection with people other than the teacher/evaluator” (153).

However, the three articles discussed here also identify many of the same problems we have experienced in attempting to teach writing via ITV. Rodrigues lists among the disadvantages the difficulty of conducting workshop activities and of keeping remote students on task, along with the communication delays resulting from technical limitations (“Teaching”). And Dallas and her colleagues note that while the majority of students surveyed felt that “distance education is worth the cost, in spite of its disadvantages,” many students also voiced frustration about those disadvantages: the chilling effect on spontaneous interaction imposed by the knowledge that students’ spoken responses would be broadcast over a wide area, the time lag in getting written feedback on their work, and the limited access to computers at schools in rural areas (4). Furthermore, the “microscoped” images of students and teachers that appear on the television monitors obscure nonverbal cues essential to communication in the traditional classroom: “Gestures, facial expressions, and individual and group dynamics are lost when the image of the person on the screen is only a fraction of the size of the actual person” (Dallas, Dessommes, and

Hendrix 3). Neff is most concerned about the ways in which interactive-video technology affects how students construct themselves as writers, how teachers construct themselves as instructors, and the structure of the relationship between the two. In a memo to herself, Neff asks how the use of technology challenges common assumptions about the role of the writing teacher: “the coach

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metaphor, mentor metaphor, or editor metaphor imply a ‘personal’ relationship between two people (actually two stable individuals)” (143). Distance-education technology by its very nature challenges traditional concepts of presence and absence and thus renders all of the traditional metaphors problematic, along with the entire notion of authority in the classroom.

Guidelines for Success

Despite these limitations and challenges, the authors of three articles examined here, along with our colleagues here at USU–Uintah Basin, remain convinced that ITV is a viable, if not optimal, tool for teaching composition. However, without adherence to certain guidelines by administrators, school counselors, instructors, and students, the distance-learning experience is likely to be one of frustration for

all involved. To begin with, Rodrigues suggests that distance-learning administrators “take students’ learning needs into account” by providing them a variety of options—a mix of ITV and Web-based courses—and that universities “develop ways of matching students with course types so that students who need visual and oral interactivity are not placed in inappropriate courses” (“Models,” Conclusion, par. 5). And Dallas, Dessommes, and Hendrix make the following recommendations:

- > that a course not be offered to more than one remote site at a time, or to a single student at a remote location, “because such situations further limit the already reduced opportunities for interaction between the teacher and students and among the students themselves” (3),
- > that the university control the enrollment of high school students to ensure that they meet requirements—Dallas and her colleagues report that “when GSU did not control the selection of local-site students, seven out of ten students were not in good academic standing” (3),
- > that class caps for remote classes be lower than for on-campus sections: eighteen as opposed to twenty-two at GSU (4),
- > that instructors visit each of their remote sites at least once a month “to foster development of a learning community” (5), and
- > that the university provide distance-learning instructors with adequate compensation for the extra time and travel required; otherwise, “those who may be forced to teach the classes will opt for the banking concept of education that Freire criticizes rather than the principle of a community of learners” (5).

Dallas, Dessommes, and Hendrix conclude by outlining the responsibilities of both administrators and instructors for the success of distance-learning programs:

[. . .] we must continue to work on improving the distance learning experience. Travel is a necessity, the cost of which must be shared among all concerned administrative units. The extra time and energy that distance education teachers devote to the student must be recognized. Faculty members must continue to look for technological advancements that facilitate interaction among the students at the sites. If technology is going to help instructors refine students’ writing, critical thinking, and appreciation of language, then the barriers that technology imposes must be overcome. (5)

Based on our experience of teaching concurrent-enrollment composition classes via ITV, and bolstered by the published findings of our peers, we have drawn up our own list of essential criteria for the success of such endeavors:

1. *Careful selection of students*: School administrators and counselors must carefully screen potential students to ensure that only those with advanced writing skills and a high degree of motivation and self-discipline are enrolled in the course. Otherwise, students are being set up for failure.
2. *Recruitment and training of competent classroom facilitators*: In the absence of a live teacher, the role of the facilitator is crucial—not only to facilitate the delivery of information, but also to keep the students on task.

3. *Use of appropriate technology:* Instructors can no longer rely on the blackboard alone but must make use of instructional technology, such as Microsoft's PowerPoint or Elmo, to ensure that their presentations will be clearly visible at the receiving site. Instructors can also simplify delivery of materials by setting up a supplementary online classroom from which students can download and print out syllabi, assignment descriptions, and class notes, and through which they can take quizzes, submit assignments, and communicate with remote classmates through e-mail, chat rooms, or file-sharing groups.
4. *Use of strategies for reproducing a "live" classroom atmosphere:* While the frequent site visits recommended by Dallas and her colleagues would go a long way toward creating a live atmosphere, such visits are not feasible in the situations in which many of us find ourselves here in Utah, where one class may be broadcast to ten sites hundreds of miles apart. But even in these circumstances, instructors can avoid succumbing to what Freire calls the "banking model" of education, creating instead a sense of collaboration by experimenting with innovative techniques such as "mirror pedagogy" (see Rodrigues, "Models," Pedagogical Choices section, par. 20).

Classroom Management

The cardinal guideline for encouraging collaboration among remote sites linked by interactive TV is to engage every site during every class in some way. Checking into individual sites, calling students by name, and making sure that each site is displayed on the monitor as students offer comments are crucial to developing an interactive broadcast classroom. However, we have found that additional structure is needed to guarantee effective discussions over interactive TV, and the following strategies have worked well for us in providing this structure:

1. *Use workshop formats.* One excellent way to encourage more productive on-site peer response is to model commenting and editing on rough drafts by displaying student writing on an overhead projector. This is part of what Rodrigues refers to as "mirror pedagogy."
2. *Use electronic peer response.* We encourage students to post papers to an electronic message board or simply assign students to exchange papers by fax or e-mail attachments. This works best when one site exchanges with another site so there is full-class accountability.
3. *Use reading response groups.* We have found it helpful to "seed" prompts, in other words to assign various topics to each site in advance (sometimes the day before, other times a few minutes before beginning discussions). In addition, we try to give remote students time for collaborative discussion in small groups to plan out their on-camera answers, thus minimizing awkward pauses and maximizing thoughtful discussion.
4. *Request a specified number of critical responses from each site.* We make an effort to acknowledge each student comment and ask for clarification or additions when necessary (again, modeling the way we want students to respond to one another).
5. *Assign a "one-minute paper."* This can be a group or an individual assignment

designed to summarize the main points of a class discussion. Written responses can then be added to a portfolio or submitted to the facilitator.

As a note of caution, there can indeed be too much interaction, so we encourage e-mail use. Student-specific and site-specific questions clutter up the broadcast format and distract students for whom the comments are irrelevant. On the other hand, rather than giving extensive e-mail writing conferences to individual students (particularly in larger classes), we instead encourage peer response, either on-site or electronically.

Collaborating over distance is a function of classroom climate as much as course content. In other words, simply planning a course with interactive activities is only one part of creating an interactive broadcast classroom. As in any live classroom, the teacher's persona helps to create the classroom climate. Teachers might do well to note how TV news anchors create a presence and apply similar techniques to their broadcast teaching:

As in any live classroom, the teacher's persona helps to create the classroom climate.

- > Looking directly into the camera and minimizing body movements—the larger the face appears on the monitor, the better students can cue into facial expressions.
- > Working on articulation—teachers may also have to slow down natural speech patterns in order to come across clearly.
- > Learning to relax and not be afraid to show a range of emotions to the camera, speaking *with* students, not *at* them.

Even experienced teachers need tune-ups in their broadcast personas, so we recommend periodically watching videotapes of your own broadcasts to remind yourself how remote students see you on camera.

Student Selection and Facilitator Involvement

Given the great variations among the student populations, learning situations, and available technologies at the various sites to which we broadcast, it is difficult to develop valid comparative assessments of the efficacy of the aforementioned guidelines. However, our experience has convinced us that, beyond everything the instructor can do, success for concurrent-enrollment students enrolled in distance-ed English classes is predicated on two essentials: student selection and facilitator involvement. A few brief case studies will illustrate the importance of these factors. The first case is that of a small, isolated high school in the northeastern corner of Utah, an hour's drive over winding mountain roads from the nearest town of any size. Owing to the limited resources of the school, no full-time facilitator is available, but school counselors have consistently advised only highly motivated, self-disciplined students to enroll in our English 1010 classes, and these students have always performed well in the course. (The part-time facilitator has always been most helpful in delivering course materials and assignments to and from students.)

In the second case, that of a much larger high school along Interstate 80 in north-central Utah, school officials have not been particularly selective about the students who enroll in English 1010, but the classroom facilitator is highly engaged in motivating the students to keep up with the work, and success rates are also good at this site.

The third case, by contrast, involves a small rural school in southwestern Utah which evidently lacks either a selective registration policy or an engaged facilitator, and this is a recipe for disaster. Failure rates at this site and others like it have been far higher than in either live classes or well-managed remote classes. Of course, in the best of all possible worlds, all sites would have selective enrollment policies and full-time facilitators, but not all schools can find enough qualified people to supply facilitators for every class. All schools can, however, work to improve their selection process. At present, the only requirements for admitting high school students to USU's English 1010 classes are that they have senior status and a 3.0 GPA. It has been pointed out to us, however, that at some schools practically the entire student body has a 3.0 GPA, and therefore we recommend that school counselors adopt stricter criteria of their own—perhaps a 3.0 GPA in English courses, or limiting enrollment to students in the top 20 percent of the class (as is already the case in concurrent-enrollment programs in some states).

Implementation of these and the other recommendations outlined herein should minimize problems for students, facilitators, instructors, and administrators and allow for the creation of an interactive-TV classroom more closely resembling a traditional classroom than a drive-by English attack. But since some problems, such as the difficulty of finding and retaining qualified personnel, the limited availability of state-of-the-art technology, and the inevitable technical glitches, will be with us always, the success of dual-credit distance-ed writing courses requires of both instructors and students a high degree of motivation, self-discipline, flexibility, and above all, patience. ◀

Note

1. Comparable figures for USU were not available at press time, but one local administrator told the authors that the \$800-per-student cost savings estimate “sounds about right.”

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AWARDS ANNOUNCED FOR TECHNICAL AND SCIENTIFIC COMMUNICATION

The Committee on Technical and Scientific Communication of NCTE has announced the winners of its Awards for Excellence in Technical and Scientific Writing. The awards were presented during the CCCC Annual Convention in San Francisco, California, March 16–19, 2005. Judges for this year's competition in books were Beverly Sauer, Carnegie Mellon University, and Rachel Spilka, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Judges for this year's competition in articles were Kathryn Raign, University of North Texas; Danielle DeVoss, Michigan State University; and Clay Spinuzzi, University of Texas–Austin. The winners:

Best Book in Technical or Scientific Communication: Clay Spinuzzi, *Tracing Genres through Organizations: A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003. **Article Reporting Qualitative or Quantitative Research in Technical or Scientific Communication:** Owen Hargie, David Dickson, and Seanenne Nelson, "Working Together in a Divided Society: A Study of Intergroup Communication in the Northern Ireland Workplace." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 17 (July 2003): 285–318. **Article Reporting Historical Research or Textual Studies in Technical or Scientific Communication:** Gail Lippincott, "Something in Motion and Something to Eat Attract the Crowd: Cooking with Science at the 1893 World's Fair." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 33.2 (2003): 141–164. **Article on Philosophy or Theory of Technical or Scientific Communication:** Priscilla S. Rogers and Song Mei Lee-Wong, "Reconceptualizing Politeness to Accommodate Dynamic Tensions in Subordinate-to-Superior Reporting." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 17 (October 2003): 379–412. **Article on Methods of Teaching Technical or Scientific Communication:** Ellen Barton and Laurie Evans, "A Case of Multiple Professionalisms: Service learning and Control of Communication about Organ Donation." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 17 (October 2003): 413–438.

The **deadline** for entries for the 2005 awards competition, which is open to works published from January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2004, is **June 15, 2005**. Letters of acknowledgement will be sent to individuals submitting nominations. Submissions should be sent with four copies of the article or book and specifically entered in one of the above categories. Any work originally written in a language other than English must be submitted in translation. Each submission may be nominated in only one category; individuals submitting nominations are encouraged to consult with authors about the category most appropriate for their work. Submissions should include author's name, telephone number, mailing address, and e-mail address. Send nominations and entries to: NCTE 2005 Technical and Scientific Award, c/o NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096, Attention: Melissa Prentice.
