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Amy Piotrowski
Utah State University

Marla Robertson

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Engagement Across the Miles: Using Videoconferencing with Small Groups in Synchronous Distance Courses

*By Amy Piotrowski, Ph.D. and Marla Robertson, Ph.D.
Utah State University*

Abstract

This article presents suggestions for conducting small-group work in synchronous distance courses taught using Interactive Videoconferencing (IVC) systems. One challenge of teaching over an IVC system is getting students involved in class activities. The authors share how they have used a videoconferencing tool to break up IVC classes into small groups for discussion activities and get peer feedback on written work. These activities engage students in applying what they are learning and in constructing knowledge through discussion with their peers.

Introduction

Classroom dialogue is a powerful component of effective pedagogy (Howe & Abeden, 2013), especially as a way to encourage active student engagement and higher-order learning (Pahmer, Groschner, & Seidel, 2015). As university professors tasked with teaching our content through synchronous distance courses over Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC) systems, finding ways to incorporate effective classroom dialogue has been challenging. We know from previous research that dialogue that allows students to communicate through multiple modes, media and genre (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, representing) is a critical piece of learning (Ritchart, Church, & Morrison, 2011; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky,

1978). Therefore, providing opportunities for all student voices to be heard and valued, particularly students who may be attending class alone in a remote location, is an important part of our work (Freire, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

Challenges of Engagement in IVC Courses

Previous research shows that teaching over an IVC system presents challenges for instructors as they seek to engage students in class activities. Fitzgibbon (2003) found that some students “took advantage” of not being in the same place as the instructor to behave inappropriately and off-task (p. 31). Stone and Saulino (1997) concluded that the less the professor lectured and the more students shared their thoughts, the higher students rated the course. Sweeten (2016) presented students’ self-reported beliefs that they are more likely to ask questions and feel they learn more in face-to-face classes over IVC classes. These prior studies suggest that the need to find ways to get students connected and actively participating with their peers in learning activities becomes even more important when students and instructor are not together in the same location.

We believe an important part of effective teaching is building a classroom community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Building classroom community is challenging, even in face-to-face environments. This can be especially difficult in an IVC environment where we teach students attending from up to nine different sites at a time. However, one way to build classroom community is to incorporate effective classroom discourse practices that integrate facilitation by the instructor and listening and engaging in discussions by the students (Lloyd, Kolodziej, & Brashears, 2016).

Using Small-Group Videoconferencing in IVC Courses

We use Cisco Meeting Application, or CMA, a videoconferencing tool embedded in our university’s Learning Management System, Canvas. (This tool was known as Acano before Fall 2017.) Before the semester begins, we ask our IVC system administrator to set up the CMA groups. We typically ask for enough groups

so that each group is limited to three or four individuals. Once the groups are set up, we get a link for each group. We can then set up a page in Canvas with links, so all a student has to do to join the CMA discussion is to click on the link associated with their group. The instructor can easily join in each group's discussion by using the links. This allows the instructor to go from group to group monitoring discussion, just as an instructor could walk around a face-to-face classroom to check in with each group as they meet. Students in each CMA group also have the ability to take turns leading the discussion and to share screens with the group. Many other videoconferencing tools have features similar to CMA, so we anticipate our tips will be broadly applicable to educators using any variety of similar applications in their classrooms.

Tips for Engaging Students in Small Groups via Videoconferencing

We have used CMA groups in a variety of ways in our classes. One approach is to have students discuss assigned readings for the course as a way to engage everyone in the conversation. Thus, students know that they will be accountable for their assigned readings and will get more opportunities to speak than in a large whole-class discussion. Research shows that using reading, writing, and discussion in collaborative student groups aids learners in understanding the material and improves student achievement (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Here are some tips for conducting discussions of reading assignments:

1. Have students prepare for discussion by writing something to bring with them to class. We have our students write a Reading Response before class meetings. These Reading Responses include listing 8 to 10 important points from the reading, a comment on why what they learned from the reading is important, how they might apply what they read, and two questions they have after reading. During small-group discussions, students share their questions with the rest of the group, which allows student inquiry to drive the discussion. We typically give groups 15 minutes to meet.
2. Check in with each group. Students like getting to talk to their instructor in a smaller setting. They can share what the group is discussing and ask the instructor questions.

3. Once small-group discussions have finished, have each group share an important point from their discussion with the rest of the class. We have each group pick a spokesperson who will speak for the group during this whole-class discussion.

A variation of this type of discussion is for students to post a reading response on a discussion board prior to class with questions to ask the class. CMA could then be used to respond to group members' questions in class.

Another possible discussion activity is called a jigsaw. A jigsaw discussion is a way to have more readings available for students or to “learn content that has been broken into chunks” (Silver, Strong & Perini, 2007, p. 187). In this case, students are not assigned to read all of the readings, but are assigned to only read parts. They learn about the highlights from other members of their class. In this case, CMA would be used two different times for the discussion: first, for the expert group and second, for the jigsaw group. Here are the steps to conducting a jigsaw discussion:

1. Students are assigned to read one of a group of readings. For this example, we will say that there are four readings. Each student will be assigned to a group and will read that group's assigned article before the next class meeting. Students will be expected to come to class with notes about their reading.
2. When students come to class, all students who read the same reading would get together and discuss the most salient points of the reading via a discussion link. So, all 1's would be in one group, all 2's would be in a group, etc. This is often called the expert group. Students in these groups would take notes on the major points they want to share with their classmates, based on the discussion.
3. Next, the groups rearrange, with one person per assigned reading in a group. For our example, each group would then be made up of a 1, 2, 3, and 4 student. The experts on each reading would then share the major points of their article with their new group and discuss the commonalities or differences between the readings.

Another way we have used CMA groups is as a way for students to provide peer feedback on writing assignments. As Kirby and Crovitz (2013) say, “Writers need readers –a community for praise, suggestions, feedback, and responses” (201). Students could get peer feedback on a variety of assignments, including essays, research papers, and lab reports. Students can get on CMA either in pairs or small

groups. They can read aloud their writing, share it via email or a discussion board with their group, or they can use CMA's screen-sharing feature to show their work to their group. Here are some tips for conducting a peer feedback activity:

1. Provide guidelines for what kind of feedback students should provide to their peers. You can even have students tell their groupmates what they would like feedback on.
2. Provide enough time for each individual to get feedback on their writing. You may want to set a timer for when groups should move on to the next person's work.
3. To encourage helpful and constructive feedback, you can have students evaluate the feedback they get from their peers. You could make this evaluation of their peers a grade. We have also seen instructors offer extra-credit points or some other reward to students whose feedback is rated most helpful by their peers.

Students can also get peer feedback on other class assignments. For example, our students create lesson plans that they can share with the group to get feedback on improving the lesson plan before they submit it for grading. Alternatively, students can do their lesson with the other members of the group, as the students.

Conclusion

While we don't have student evaluation data to analyze at this time, our students have told us how they appreciate the opportunity to interact with their peers. Students have said that they especially appreciate getting to know peers at other sites whom they may not get to meet face-to-face. Our experiences suggest that using videoconferencing with small groups can build a community of learners in distance courses and help students engage with course content through discussions.

Videoconferencing in small groups can be used for a variety of class activities, particularly discussion and peer feedback activities. Tools such as CMA can enable teachers of IVC courses to do many of the kinds of activities that can be done in face-to-face settings. By making IVC classes more interactive and getting more student participation, instructors can move away from lectures and toward activities that allow

students to apply what they are learning and construct knowledge through interactions with their peers.

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