

Chapter IV

Making the System Work: The Content Provider and Videoconferencing in the K–12 Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the modality and benefits of videoconferencing from the content provider's perspective. The content provider as "field expert" is discussed along with the benefits of providing nationwide outreach to K-12 educators and students via a cost-effective, interactive media. Applications of videoconferencing are addressed in addition to the perceptions of the provider in such areas as the needs of the K-12 educational community, methods and tools for presenting successful virtual field trips, and evidence of impact through informal teacher feedback and a professional study conducted in 2000. The author also addresses how providers can reach out to and collaboratively work with other organizations to enhance and build capacity.

INTRODUCTION

Videoconferencing has permeated rural and urban K-12 school systems across the nation and beyond. This virtual world has opened doors for non-traditional educators and professionals working in various fields of industry, science, history, and the arts to share specialized knowledge and interact with students in a real-time environment. In a recent article in *Learning and*

Leading in Technology, the author notes, "Many traditional field trip resource locations such as museums, zoos, and historical sites are creating video-conferencing sessions for the K-12 audience" (Pachnowski, 2002, p. 10). The Center for Puppetry Arts, the largest nonprofit organization dedicated to puppetry in the United States, has provided arts-based videoconferencing programs to K-12 audiences since 1997. This chapter will explore the Center for Puppetry Arts' role as an

effective content provider by discussing the following issues: use and perceptions of the provider, meeting educational community needs, tools for successful virtual field trips (VFTs), and evidence of impact through a professional study.

BENEFITS OF VIDEOCONFERENCING TECHNOLOGY

Benefits to the Provider

The Center has found videoconferencing to be a viable, cost-effective way to fulfill its global outreach mission of nurturing the world community of artists and expanding the puppetry art form. Prior to 1998, the Center's traditional, physical outreach was regionally and financially limited. Artists traveled in vans to schools within a 300-mile radius of Atlanta and worked face-to-face with students and teachers. The Center mainly served Georgia and South Carolina school systems. This limited regional focus was mainly due to travel and transportation costs associated with the program. The program also required four full-time staff members, a team which was

difficult to maintain due to the physical demands of the job and the time spent away from home. The Center realized that it was unable to develop the national and global educational reach which had been set forth in its mission statement due to these constraints. Videoconferencing provided a viable solution by eliminating the boundaries of time and the cost associated with “physical outreach.” It required fewer staff to administer programs, eliminated the overhead costs associated with travel and transportation, and allowed the Center to develop a national and international audience base, reaching 35 states and three countries by 2005 (Figure 1). The Center also was able to develop unique, hands-on puppetry arts programming complementing state and national curriculum standards in technology, fine arts, social studies, life sciences, and language arts for the K-12 audience.

Virtual Field Trips (VFTs) as Teaching Tools

One question often raised by potential funding sources and educators as a challenge to VFT programs and the teaching modality itself is the following, “Is it as effective a teaching tool as a

Figure 1. Areas reached via videoconferencing 1998-2006



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