Chapter 17
Web Conferencing as a Pedagogical Tool:
Results from a Brazilian Experience

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Web conferencing is videoconferencing using Internet connections. When it is applied in educational environments, it enables a new paradigm for teaching through a face-connected classroom. This chapter presents results from a Brazilian study at the University of Brasilia (UnB), where Web conferencing is being used as the primary teaching tool in an academic master's degree course. The research focus is the transposition of the teachers' roles from traditional to a face-connected virtual classroom. Special attention is given to Web conferencing as an implementer for teaching and learning in collaborative communities.

INTRODUCTION

Video conferencing using Internet connections, also named Web conferencing, is a technological possibility of synchronous communication between different people, physically distant from each other, in which participants can see and be seen in the screens of their computers, listen to others, and be heard by them. By using this communication tool, they can establish a new type of relationship between users in the virtual environment, called face-connected relation (Ferrari & Lapolli, 2003, p. 35).

Although not originally developed with a pedagogical purpose, Web conferencing has been used in some teaching interactions with satisfactory performance (Dixon, 2000; Fetterman, 1997; Moonki, 2003). However, due to its incipient use, there is need to encourage academic research projects about the use of this technology as a teaching tool so as to identify its limitations as to define its real pedagogical potential, with particular emphasis on the performance of teachers to use the full capacity of Web conferencing as implementers of collaborative communities of teaching and learning networks.

TECHNOLOGIES AND EDUCATION

Imagine studying with classmates in Moscow, Mexico City, New York, Hong Kong, Vancouver and Sydney, urban centers and rural and remote areas. Like you, they never have to leave. Everyone learns together, not in one place in the ordinary sense, but in a shared space, a cyberspace, through systems that connect to a network of people around the globe. In network learning, the classroom is anywhere we can find a computer, a modem and a telephone line, a satellite or radio link. When a student connects to network, computer screen becomes a window to a learning world (Harasim, et al., 2005, p. 132).

Some decades ago, this would have sounded like science fiction, but today it is reality.

In every era of human history, technological advances have been responsible for changes in the processes in all human activity fields and have resulted in many changes in cultural behaviors. The fast development of electronics and digital technology during the last century has led to progress in almost all areas. Information resulting from these advances is the foundation of modern technology and basis for the "Third Industrial Revolution" (Toffler, 1980, p. 20) we are experiencing today.

In the last four decades, the computer has revolutionized all branches of society, from trade, industry, and recreation to education. Knowledge in all fields has undergone deep changes; thus, school has been faced with the need to adjust to new demands by making use of new technology, such as Web conferencing.

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