

**No:** P54  
**Title:** Video-conferencing opportunities in Year 1: a classroom case study  
**Author:** Kate Gair, Sunnybrow Primary

## **Background**

I work in a semi-rural area in the North East of England. My class is a mixed age class (Year 1 and Year 2) and some children come from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited experiences of life outside their own environment.

During a recent Action Research event I was discussing, with an ICT Test Bed colleague, some aspects of ICT we had found to be particularly useful in our classes with defined groups e.g. Special Needs, reluctant writers etc.

My colleague was looking for someone to video conference with on a regular basis. Her aims were to set up a regular link with a local school and to improve her children's speaking and listening skills. Improving speaking and listening skills was one of our schools' main areas for development during the year and I was interested in using this equipment so we agreed to start video conferencing.

We decided that Numeracy would be the best subject to use for video conferencing as we would be working on the same aspect of the programmes of study at the same time as each other. This would not necessarily be the case for other subjects. We also decided that video conferencing with the whole class and trying to deliver a lesson would not be realistic with such a young set of children and with quite a few special needs children. We therefore decided to limit the sessions initially to a group of five or six more able children in Year One. Our intention was to set up a video conferencing group that would become part of our normal everyday activities in the class.

## **Aim**

My initial aim was to use video conferencing to deliver short, focused sessions that would advance the learning of the more able children in Year One. I wanted to see if this method of delivery helped to accelerate their learning. A secondary aim was to see if video conferencing developed the children's speaking and listening skills.

## **Sessions**

With my partner in her local school, we link up for video-conferencing once a week. The sessions are 20 minutes long and we take turns in leading the lesson. We are both lucky to have support during the Numeracy lesson and this allows us to withdraw groups for this session.

The sessions begin with a quick mental warm up linked to the area we are covering. We then introduce the objective for the lesson and explain our first activity. We usually work through two or three different activities and then end with a plenary.

## **Preparation**

We email an outline of the work we hope to cover, the objective for the lesson and details of any equipment needed for the lesson. A typical email read as follows:

*"Hi Barbara,*

*This week we are moving on to work with money – I will be doing some work on equivalence and then some problems.*

*I will lead the lesson and bring my middle-ability group – working to about 20p if that's OK with you?*

*Please bring money fans, money, whiteboards and pens. See you on Friday.*

*Email if any queries.*

*Thanks Kate"*

In the sessions, small whiteboards and pens are usually used. As with any lesson there are resources to find/make. We have found that we have had to adapt some of the resources we use. For instance, anything we need to show to the children, such as coins, numbers or objects, has to be bigger than usual.

### **Technician support**

Initially we depended on technician support for our link-ups but as the weeks have progressed we have become more proficient and now manage quite easily on our own - most of the time!

### **Findings from this activity**

#### *Social development*

One of the unexpected and welcome aspects of our weekly video conferencing has been the social developments arising from the occasion. My children look forward to our sessions and are aware that this is special work as we move into another area away from the main classroom.

We always begin by introducing ourselves to each other and this is an opportunity for the other teacher to make a quick note of names. The children begin to recognise familiar faces after the first session.

The sessions have also helped the children's speaking and listening skills. The children are aware that they are speaking to another audience and this makes them more aware of their language. They now know that they must speak clearly and look directly at the screen. This has helped some of the children with maintaining eye contact. They also know that they need to wait their turn or wait to be asked to give an answer.

Being in such a small group the children know that they are going to be asked perhaps more questions than usual so they have to be ready to answer at all times. This keeps the children very focussed.

Praise given by another teacher is always special and we make sure that this is a regular occurrence in our video conferencing sessions.

#### *Sharing Teaching Methods*

Another unexpected and very welcome aspect of sharing lessons like this is the insight into other teachers' teaching methods.

Every teacher has their own method of delivery and their own individual 'take' on a particular aspect of learning. We all find some parts of the curriculum easier/harder to deliver than others. Often it takes time and experience to find the best way to show a new concept to the children. This is where two heads are sometimes better than one. I have learned new approaches and games from my colleague.

"Here's a game we play in our class – would you like to learn how to play it?"

is quite often heard towards the end of the lesson as we draw the lesson to a close or use a game to deliver the plenary. One of our children will explain the game to the other children.

The lessons I have shared with my colleague have given me new ideas to try out in other lessons and vice versa.

### **Comparing Video-Conferencing With Different groups**

We decided to use a different group after the first half term. All the children in the class were keen to video conference – so after working with the more able, we then worked with a group of middle-ability children. These children were also well motivated and we both felt that the children gained from the sessions both socially and academically.

Our last group of children was the least able and we both have children in this group with Special Needs. This group proved least motivated by the experience. The more able in the group enjoyed the experience and were well-focused; however, the least able found the intensity of the sessions difficult and did not get as much out of it in terms of learning as our other children. Their concentration times were shorter and they found it difficult to maintain interest. Socially, these children also found it difficult to relate to others and did not interact as well as our more able and able children, however this may have been more to do with their particular type of special needs rather than the type of activity we were attempting.

### **Recent Video-Conferencing**

Since October I have also been video conferencing with another school outside of our cluster of ICT Test Bed schools. This has been with a group of sixth formers at a Community College in Cambridge.

My aim with this session has been to improve the speaking and listening skills of my children through the use of stories and poetry. This worked reasonably well but was not as successful as I'd hoped. The children were not as motivated as they had been in our more local video-conferencing sessions.

This could have been due to the format of these sessions not being as interactive as the one they had been used to. The class took a much more passive role in these video conferencing sessions and quickly became restless. We (the students and I) discussed the problem via emails and the students from the sixth form

college have now started to incorporate jokes and riddles into their sessions. This has improved the interaction from our side. Quite independently, my children have now started to think of activities that they would like to try out on the students – their own jokes, favourite poems and some of their own poetry.

## **Evaluation**

The sessions have been difficult to evaluate. We started off with a highly motivated group. We wanted to provide challenge and interest to motivate them further. Improving the children's speaking and listening skills was also a key aim.

I talked with my children about the video-conferencing and asked them what they had liked about the sessions. The children said that they liked talking with other children (some of my children were friends with the children in the other class) and they liked the other teacher because she was "nice and friendly"

The more able children had a more objective view of what they were doing and thought that they were doing hard work during the sessions. They preferred the small group session to the whole class session that we did with the Cambridge group. They said that they liked the work they did in the numeracy sessions because they had to do things and get up to show the other children what to do or to answer a question. They preferred the numeracy sessions to the story session because they took a more active role. They thought that they had learned lots because they had two teachers teaching them and not just one.

From my own point of view I found that teaching in this focused way concentrated a lot of input into a short space of time. I was aware of having a limited amount of time to cover the objectives of the lesson. I was also conscious that the lesson had to go well not only for my children but for another teacher's children. This put the onus on me to deliver an effective and stimulating lesson within the confines of video conferencing. I found that I was making minor adjustments as I delivered the lesson, based on the feedback I was receiving from the other group, to enable the session to run smoothly. This sometimes involved making things easier or more challenging, changing the order in which I introduced activities and varying the pace, sometimes concentrating more on a concept which needed reinforcement.

The children, generally speaking, are more confident in their speaking and are aware of their audience. They make attempts to be more formal in their answers and to speak directly to the camera.

## **Factors to take into consideration**

We found it important to keep in regular contact when video conferencing. We email each other with details of the lessons' objectives and equipment that will be needed.

One of the downsides of Video-conferencing is that both picture and sound quality can be variable although with technical assistance this has improved greatly. It also takes a little while to get used to the slight delay in sound transmission, however, the children cope with this well and are not fazed by it at all.

Another aspect of video conferencing to take into consideration is that it is very easy to concentrate on the group that you are video-conferencing with to the exclusion of your own resident group. It is easy to be so focused on how the other side is reacting to an activity, or interacting with you, that your own children can feel left out. I was conscious that this was happening at the start, but as we began the second or third sessions both of us felt more at ease and in control of the process so we began to relax and make the most of what we could do with the facilities.

As always, getting the right mix is tricky but we seem to be getting there and the children always look forward to the sessions whether it be with our local school or further afield.

Flexibility is very important as things do go wrong occasionally. We always have alternative activities ready in case the technology doesn't work. Our link up locally is by broadband and these link ups are successful nine times out of ten. Our link up with the Suffolk College is more problematic as this is an ISDN link.

An important consideration is the size of the group. We chose children of roughly the same ability and limited the numbers to six or seven children. Obviously we were lucky enough to have support to enable us to do this. When I started video conferencing with the Suffolk students the whole class was involved and this was too large a group. I now limit the size to about half the class and this works well.

## **Conclusion**

I would recommend video conferencing to anyone who is looking to broaden their children's horizons, as for young children, it helps them to realise that there is a world out there. Working with people older or younger than themselves enables them to see how they fit into the wider world and gives them another perspective. It can also help to expand their experiences and raise expectations. Our children are now in regular contact with a variety of people whom they would never normally meet. They hear different accents and are in social contact with young people from a different background and outlook to their own.

We feel that the children have gained from their experiences sufficiently, both socially and academically, for this to be a worthwhile activity and intend to continue these sessions as long as possible.

As a teacher I have learned, as always, new ways of doing things, exchanged ideas with others, and enjoyed the interaction with another enthusiastic teacher of young children.