

# Delivery of research methods teaching

Alison Galloway

Teaching context	
<b>Subject area</b>	Research methods.
<b>Course level</b>	2nd – 3rd year undergraduates.
<b>Participants</b>	Staff 1 at site with students. Students approx. 12 at 2 sites.
<b>Type of use</b>	Lecture/tutorial.
<b>Teaching methods</b>	Flexible learning: presentations, Q&A sessions, interactive workbooks.
<b>Support materials</b>	Placed on Web for independent study.
<b>Length of use</b>	Six 1-hour sessions.
<b>Project background</b>	Pilot project funded by SHEFC Regional Strategic Initiative 1995-1997.
<b>Sites</b>	Queen Margaret College, Edinburgh (now Queen Margaret University College) and Scottish College of Textiles, Galashiels (now Heriot-Watt University, Scottish Borders Campus).
<b>Prior experience</b>	Had used videoconferencing for lectures delivered by remote expert. Fairly confident about using technology.
Technical context	
<b>Conference type</b>	Point to point.
<b>Technology used</b>	Studio based ISDN 6.
<b>Additional equipment</b>	Visualiser.
Contact	
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## Background

We had already experimented with videoconferencing being delivered by staff at the Scottish College of Textiles (SCOT) to Consumer Studies students at Queen Margaret College (QM). All participants had found the experience interesting and we were keen to keep up the momentum gained in the initial stages. Having had expensive equipment installed in both institutions, it also seemed somewhat wasteful to let it fall into disuse. In addition we wished to further explore possibilities for improving module choice for students by being able to provide courses for relatively small numbers of students.

## Why videoconferencing was chosen

We were conscious that there were students at both SCOT and QM who had a particular need for basic research methods teaching. At QM, direct entry students who move into the second or third level of our courses, after having undertaken, for example, an HNC in an FE college, generally feel disadvantaged when they arrive because their peers who took their first year at QM had already been given a fair bit of research methods teaching. Similarly, students at SCOT felt unprepared to undertake survey work which is generally required of them in their third or fourth years. This presented an ideal opportunity to extend our experiments with videoconferencing and to try out simultaneous teaching to two institutions. The small group size at each site, lending itself to effective videoconferencing, also meant that such a solution could be cost-effective in terms of institutions sharing teaching resources.

The project set a number of initial objectives:

- QM to deliver simultaneous video-linked classes for students at SCOT and QM;
- Develop interactive teaching material in research methods for use during videoconference classes with students at both sites;
- Train and develop students and staff in teaching and learning by this medium;
- Allow students to further explore issues covered in these research methods classes by placing support material on the World Wide Web;
- Evaluate the project and disseminate findings.

## The Execution

Six one hour classes were held in total, but the first was an informal introductory session to brief participants and to “break the ice”. This included suggestions for students about how best to interact during the classes, as well as giving them the chance to chat to their colleagues in the remote location. I was situated at QM with the QM students, while the other students were located in Galashiels in the Borders region. The other five classes all involved the use of the interactive workbooks, which contained notes and questions for discussion. I would go over the main theoretical issues on the subjects of, for example, data measurement, questionnaire design and sampling, and would then present the students with some questions to consider. After a suitable pause for reflection, students in both locations were asked (alternately) to suggest possible responses.

The introductory session helped the students to be comfortable in each others’ presence and interact well. We even managed to get a fair bit of “banter” going at times. The small number of students in both locations meant that I didn’t have any real problems in eliciting responses from all participants, as they accepted extremely well that they would all have to contribute to make the experience a successful one. Moreover, while the subject matter being taught could by no stretch of the imagination be considered interesting, the students all perceived a very strong personal need to become competent in this subject area in order to succeed in the rest of their degree, so their motivation was high.

## What support was needed

No formal training had been given, but we had the results of the earlier pilot project to draw on. I had the opportunity to watch these earlier videoconferenced classes, so I was conscious of a number of problems such as time delay with the equipment, use of the controls, trying to give equal attention to both groups of students, etc.

## Evaluation comments

We did conduct a formal evaluation, using both questionnaires and focus groups, with an independent member of the teaching staff. The feedback was encouraging, and students seemed to enjoy the classes and (more importantly) felt that they had learned a lot.

I was aware of the need to divide attention equally between the two groups of students, and this could be a problem especially during the delivery of theoretical background. In practice students were giving most of their attention to the workbooks during this phase, and neither group felt neglected or cut off from the lecturer.

## The Barriers

The problems caused by the time delay, for example between asking a question at my end and getting a reply at the other end, meant that I often thought that no answer was forthcoming. Similarly, I felt disconcerted when making a joke and seeing serious faces at the other end, only to find that the time delay was again the source of the problem. All participants commented on this issue and the difficulties involved. Interrupting was a particular problem, because students worried that if they started speaking at their end, the time delay could mean that they would be interrupting somebody at the other end. We tentatively approached solutions to this, using cards with symbols on them (similar to Internet “smileys”), but this didn’t really get beyond the piloting stage.

The seating arrangements were not ideal. A somewhat linear approach had been adopted at QM, while those at SCOT managed to arrange themselves in a horseshoe shape, which was more successful as it allowed students there to see each other as well as the QM site on the monitor.

The cost of the ISDN lines and difficulties of timetabling across two institutions meant that we had to cover a lot of material in a short space of time, and had no flexibility to allow classes to over-run.

## Advice for new users

I have used videoconferencing (through the MAN) since that time, but we haven’t managed to fix any other classes up yet. I would certainly like another opportunity to use this medium.

It’s useful to have some prior experience, so if possible watch or take part in a videoconference before you conduct one of your own. Try to establish a rapport with the participants. Varying the types of activity helps to keep people involved and establishes this rapport. Activities can be varied between local (i.e. off-line) or across sites using the videoconference connection. Try to build enough flexibility into your programme to adapt later conferences in the light of earlier experiences.