

VIDEOCONFERENCING

Improving Access to Training

By Steve Baxendale and Jim Bannan

For the past few years, PREL has been using videoconferencing to improve access to training while reducing travel costs. Through a partnership with the Pan-Pacific Education and Communication Experiments by Satellite program (PEACESAT), PREL now reaches all 10 entities in its service region in over 30 sites that can be connected to other videoconference (VTC) sites throughout the world.

This VTC network is being used on a regular basis to provide training and consulting services to teachers, information technology professionals at departments and ministries of education, and PREL staff. Several VTCs have been held with participants in Washington, DC, and several of the Pacific island entities at the same time.

Videoconferencing offers the opportunity for experts to “attend” meetings and assist in developing plans to improve education in the Pacific region. One of the greatest advantages of VTCs over meeting in person is that travel time is reduced or even eliminated, as the VTC site might be just down the hall or across town. Videoconferencing may not replace all travel, but it reduces travel costs and frees up time for its participants. Until recently, VTCs required a substantial investment in infrastructure and high telecommunications charges. Recent advances in technology, however, have reduced these costs and made videoconferencing available to a growing number of users in a variety of applications.

Though research has shown that VTCs are at least as effective as traditional instructional delivery systems when used appropriately, using this technology successfully requires good instructional design, prior planning, reliable service, and qualified facilitators at remote sites. Good instructional design means that clear objectives for the VTC are developed with an understanding of the learners’ needs, the goals of the meeting/training, and the learning context. Instructional designers must recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each medium, be creative, and have a good understanding of the instructional design process and learning theory.

Prior planning is also crucial for success. In addition to developing the activity, an effective VTC requires attention to details such as the best date and time, the availability of participants, and the reliability of the VTC network. Lighting, seating, and camera placement also need to be considered to



Photo: Kelly Higashi

▷ Videoconferencing makes it possible to meet face-to-face without the expense and inconvenience of travel.

create the best possible environment for learning.

Learning is dynamic and unpredictable. Motivated learners make their own decisions about their learning tasks. Videoconferencing supports a dynamic learning environment by providing synchronous, two-way communication between participants. Even body language is communicated, providing the ability to see whether a participant understands a concept or is confused or worried.

To use videoconferencing effectively, teachers must understand the basics of instructional design and be able to work with instructional designers in the development of courses. One of the best resources in this area is The National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS), developed by the International Society for Technology in Education (www.iste.org). NETS is designed to assist in preparing teachers to use technology in ways that include assessment and evaluation, productivity and professional practice, and planning and designing learning environments and experiences.

Through its PRELSTAR and PR*TEC programs, PREL is working with developers of VTC programming to identify the best applications for the Pacific region. As the VTC network grows, opportunities and access to courses, workshops, and collaborative sharing will continue to increase.

Steve Baxendale is the Program Director of PRELSTAR. Jim Bannan is the Associate Director of PRELSTAR. ★