

Effective distance teaching through flexibility

The UAF Center for Cross-Cultural Studies (CCS/CXCS) and the Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development (DANSRD) are two programs that have been providing degrees—from bachelor's to doctorates—at a distance for over three decades. Originally based on mail-in distance education, including correspondence classes, these programs now use audio conference, video conference and online instruction, alongside in-class instruction in some courses. So the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be less stressful for those of us in mostly distance-delivered programs, but some adjustments were necessary. I'll discuss here the applicability of each of the three distance-education methods to current conditions, alongside what was already in place that worked best during these times of COVID-19.

The three methods of distance-delivered classes used today by CCS and DANSRD are audio conference (the most common), online (usually asynchronous) and video conference (the least common). Audio conference classes are often taught simultaneously with an in-class section, as are video conference classes. The online classes (associated with UAF eCampus) usually stand alone. The obvious limitations shared by audio conference and online instruction are a lack of face-to-face communication, and in the case of online classes, often a lack of real-time instruction.

VERSATILITY OF AUDIO CONFERENCE

Of the three, audio conferences can be the most versatile and are very cost-effective. In CCS we use four audio conference lines for \$80 per month, enabling international graduate-level classes that are usually combined with an in-class section. This service requires no additional fees for international callers, is a relatively simple and very dependable platform, and enables real-time interaction between students and instructors. Though students participate from multiple time zones, we've found that students are often willing to attend classes no matter what the local time may be. In fact, these time differences often allow students to attend classes in hours well outside their typical workday, and in the case of many rural and Indigenous communities with limited internet, this telephone-based audio conference delivery method is nearly always accessible.

FLEXIBILITY OF ONLINE CLASSES

Online classes provide great flexibility in terms of time accessibility but lack real-time interaction and discussion of topics, as well as being difficult for many to access in rural and Indigenous communities. This condition applies worldwide, of course, and CCS has experienced multiple instances where students had difficulty accessing online instruction due to unfamiliarity with online systems or insufficient bandwidth or technology tools. But this is changing. One of the ways that I've been able to successfully overcome this limitation is to record all lectures in a format and size that can be sent through email (usually a 25 MB or so limit) or accessed through Google Drive. In this way, technological limitations can be eventually circumvented by the student, who can access files through multiple sources (email, Blackboard, etc.).

EFFECTIVENESS OF VIDEO CONFERENCE

Finally, the use of video conference, in terms of quality synchronous delivery, is the most effective other than in-class teaching. It is, however, often not available to students who are not near a campus and can be expensive, especially for a village or other small community. For this reason, and especially in the days of COVID-19, it's important to provide alternatives to those who cannot access video conferencing services from their community or household. We usually do this with audio-conference, and also usually have an in-class component at each video-conferencing site. The obvious alternative to this is using Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Blackboard Collaborate or other video conferencing services, but then these, too, are limited by bandwidth and electronic infrastructure in local communities.

So the best teaching tip that can be passed on from distance-based and rural-oriented programs like CCS and DANSRD is to be flexible, and to take into consideration the capacities of all students in our programs. If everyone is willing to be flexible and to learn how to interact with one another in multiple platform-delivered classes, or in any class really, then the greatest number of students can be effectively served.