Virtual Field Experiences using IP Videoconferencing: Benefits and Challenges

A Virtual Field Experience Classroom was created in a teacher education college to increase candidate exposure to exemplary professional practices while eliminating the logistical and continuity challenges that accompany on-site visits. This virtual field experience is designed expressly for students in a freshman level course, as their first exposure to classroom observations. Faculty recognized the need to provide field experience as early as possible in the teacher education program, but enrollment numbers made the task of providing sites and transportation daunting. There are over 300 students in the course each semester during the academic year.

This facility provides a unique laboratory in which students can interact with practicing professionals and share perspectives on real-life experiences from a distance. College instructors guide the observation and discussion as it happens. These episodes can also be captured and used for other activities. Students are taught basic digital video editing techniques, which they then use to edit the video into meaningful illustrations of teaching and learning concepts. The edited video can then be put into their professional portfolios and used by other teacher education classes as streaming media.

IP videoconferencing equipment (Polycom) is the technology being used to connect to PK12 classrooms. Through a state level initiative, there are over 500 PK12 schools that have videoconferencing capability and many of them are IP based. This potential access allows us to be selective in the schools and classrooms that are chosen to participate in this initiative. The plan is to have four to eight schools available each semester representing urban, rural, and suburban populations as well as early childhood, middle school and high school levels.

During the pilot phase of the project there were many challenges to overcome such as scheduling, equipment availability, and school selection. Some of these challenges will always remain, but procedures established will make the processes less difficult. We also anticipate that there will be further uses developed for the captured video.

The reaction of the student engaged in the process has been enthusiastic. Having the ability to observe a classroom with a different set of lenses, those of a teacher, is enlightening in itself. But the added benefit of multiple observers, and the subsequent guided discussion, make it that much more beneficial to the students and their development as teachers.