

USING VIDEO CONFERENCING TECHNOLOGY TO CONNECT STUDENTS TO THE WORLD AT-LARGE

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I teach U.S. Government, World History, and U.S. History at San Marino High School, located in Southern California in Los Angeles County. As a social studies teacher, it has progressively become my goal to connect my students with the “world-at-large,” the world we study in our classroom. Over the past 24 months, we have experienced real-time connections to journalists, historians, professors, judges, lawyers, museum curators, and other professionals via an array of accessible and affordable distance learning programs. The upshot has been a highly rewarding, innovative, engaging experience that empowers my students to connect to their own learning process.

As a result, I’ve learned that this technology is not just for the benefit of my students. Rather, it spans across all grade levels and all subject areas, including science, math, technology, and the arts. It’s also conducive to the special education classroom. In other words, all students can benefit from the implementation of videoconferencing in the classroom.

Here is a brief description (including program titles) of the video conferences in which we participated, delivered by professional content providers around the country. Here also are the names of the professionals we met and what we talked with during virtual programs that lasted about an hour or less. Over the past two years, my social studies students have been absorbed in and inspired by these live, interactive videoconferences and the people they met. They have discovered direct connections to the learning process through real people resulting in authentic relationships that have inspired them to pursue their own, relevant studies.

Our programs included:

- Names in the News
- Names in our Textbook
- Book Authors and/or Journalists
- Museum Curators and/or Staff
- Subject Matter Experts
- Students from other Schools
- Adults Willing to Hear Student End-of-Term Presentations

A content provider is a professional in any field who has access to interactive videoconferencing technology and has developed a standards-based program specifically for K-12 students. It might be a one-time event, or a series of events. The end result is that students get to talk with real people in places and/or situations that would never have been accessible any other way.

Names in the News

Patrick Paschall This Hyattsville, Maryland city council member was mentioned in a 2015 *Washington Post* article entitled, “Hyattsville Becomes Second U.S. Municipality to Lower Voting Age to 16.” Mr. Paschall described to my students the Hyattsville city

council decision, and helped my students strategize how best to convince the San Marino City Council to adopt a similar measure. The entire class enjoyed this video conference. Some of the students in the class responded to what they heard by writing a speech that they plan to give to the San Marino City Council in the fall which calls for a lowering of the voting age to 16 for San Marino city elections. This video conference was definitely one of the best of the year.

Names in our Textbook

Mary Beth Tinker was the petitioner in the 1969 Supreme Court case, *Tinker v. Des Moines*, in which the court ruled that Warren Harding Junior High School could not punish Ms. Tinker for wearing a black armband in school in support of a truce in the Vietnam War. The case, which is mentioned in most U.S. Government textbooks, set a precedent for student speech in schools. In addition to describing her case, Ms. Tinker answered student questions such as: (1) Did you ever receive any hate mail for having had your name connected to the case; (2) To what extent do you think schools should be able to punish high school students for their off campus, online speech, and: (3) We read online about something called Tinker Tour USA. What's that? In regards to the question about hate mail, Ms. Tinker showed us a drawing that had been sent to her to her in the 1960's when the court was deciding her case. The drawing was extremely hostile in nature and very much fell within the category of hate mail. Seeing this drawing up close brought all of my students to the edge of their seat. Because of this video conference, the case of *Tinker v. Des Moines* is not one that any of my students will ever forget.

Michael Newdow was the petitioner in the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Elk Grove Unified v. Newdow*, in which Mr. Newdow argued that recitations of the current version of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools should be declared unconstitutional because of its inclusion of the phrase "under God." This case is also mentioned in most U.S. Government textbooks. Student questions Mr. Newdow addressed during this videoconference included: (1) Could you please describe the case of *Elk Grove Unified v. Newdow*; (2) Do you believe that the phrase "in God we Trust" should also be removed from our paper currency; (3) Do you agree with the Supreme Court's recent ruling that legislative bodies such as city councils can begin their meetings with prayer, even if it plainly favors a specific religion? After hearing Mr. Newdow speak, some of the students in the class took what they had learned during the video conference and days later formally asked the school principal and one of the district's board members to establish a district-wide policy requiring any/all site administrators, at the start of the year, to inform all students in writing that when the Pledge is being recited they do not:

- Need to stand
- Place their right hand over their heart
- Say the Pledge along with the recitation of the Pledge over the public address system.

The students' presentation was very well received, even though it did not lead to the desired policy change.

Book Authors and/or Journalists

Amanda Roraback is the author of the *Los Angeles Times* bestseller, *Iraq in a Nutshell*, a book that helps readers understand how Saddam Hussein became so powerful in Iraq; why the Kurds and Shi'ites have become such important players in the creation of a post Saddam government; how Iraq's oil reserves have affected international politics, and why the world was so divided in its support or criticism of U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Ms. Roraback described her book in detail and then answered questions related to Palestine and Israel, ISIS, Osama Bin Laden and Islamist terrorism, the Iranian nuclear threat and the India/Pakistan conflict. Ms. Roraback is a very gifted public speaker, one who knows how to talk so students will listen and listen so students will talk. Students from central Asia, (one, an Iranian male, another a Palestinian female, and two others, a boy and a girl, both Muslims from India) especially gravitated to her; not only asking one question after the other but afterwards letting me know how "cool" she was and how much they "liked" her.

Jonathan Eig is the author of *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson's First Season*. Mr. Eig told the students about his book, and addressed questions such as: (1) What was the hardest and the best part about writing this book; (2) If your book were to be turned into a movie, who would you want to see cast in the main role; and, (3) What's the title of your next book? In answer to the question about a possible title for his next book, Mr. Eig said his next book, which he had already started, would be about the professional boxer Muhammad Ali. And with that, the students' interest was ignited. Learning about Ali, for most of them, held far greater interest than learning about Robinson. Therefore, after the video conference was over, I had no choice but to produce a one period mini lesson designed to teach the students about Muhammed Ali. When students are that fired up to learn, I find it impossible to say no, can't do, we have to get back to teaching the curriculum.

Subject Matter Experts

Christina Fahad is a Burbank High School mock trial teacher-coach who's especially known for her ability to teach the hearsay rule. The hearsay rule is "an out-of-court statement introduced to prove the truth of the matter asserted therein," and hearsay evidence is inadmissible unless an exception to the Hearsay Rule is applied. Ms. Fahad teaches the Hearsay Rule in such a way that the students can easily grasp the concept. The goal of this video conference was to give my school's mock trial team, which I coach, a chance to learn the hearsay rule from Ms. Fahad's perspective as an addition to my instruction on this topic. What a great job she did! And it was apparent that students applied what they had learned from Ms. Fahad during the annual Los Angeles County Mock Trial Competition.

Suzie Ling is an Associate Professor of Modern World History at Pasadena City College. Student questions Ms. Ling addressed during the video conference included: (1) As a Modern World History teacher at the college level, what part of the course do

you enjoy teaching the most; (2) If we were to ask your students to tell us what they think you do best as a history teacher, what would they say; (3) Do you think North Korea and South Korea will reunite some day; (4) Do you think China will “go democratic” within the next 25 years; and, (5) Do you think the scuffle between Russia and Ukraine over Crimea will lead to a World War III? The students also asked Ms. Ling, “How did your parents react when you told them you wanted to become a social studies teacher, rather than a doctor, a lawyer, or a CEO of a major company?” Ms. Ling, who is Chinese, answered this question by saying that her parents, surprisingly, supported her fully, though in high school and college the expectation certainly was that she would become something other than a mere teacher, especially from other Asian females. Other than that, the best part of this video conference was for the students to hear from a college professor who teaches a subject many students have a real interest in. Ms. Ling has a passion for the subject of World History and, like Ms. Rorabach, knows how to talk about the subject in a way that left the students wanting to hear more.

Museum Curators and/or Staff

Anthony Pennay is the Director of the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Presidential Learning Center at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation (Simi Valley, CA). For this video conference, students showed Mr. Pennay the early stages of an exhibit that they are creating. The exhibit is designed for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Learning Center and is entitled: *The Legacy of Ronald Reagan: The Extent to Which Ronald Reagan is Still Remembered in 2015*. Mr. Pennay provided the students with great feedback which led to the students meeting for over an hour twice during the last week of school to discuss how best to work to turn Mr. Pennay’s suggestions into concrete action the summer.

Susana Bautista is the Director of Public Engagement at USC Pacific Asia Museum (Pasadena, CA). Ms. Bautista provided my students with a tour of the museum’s Ikko Style Exhibit that highlights the work of master Japanese graphic designer Tanaka Ikko from the postwar period. She provided a reflection on how Japan was changing during this critical time and how Ikko was central to helping form that new image. The students not only found Mr. Ikko’s work interesting to look at, but then after the video conference had ended, appeared very open to my lecture on the topic of the history of Japan in the post World War II period.

Students From Other Schools

Students from CAMS (California Academy of Mathematics and Science) For this video conference, students enrolled in the Academy’s U.S. Government courses (taught by Mr. Gene Almeida) took on the role of the U.S. Congress while students in my U.S. Government class took on the role of citizens wanting to amend the U.S. Constitution. The goal of the students in my class was to convince 2/3rds or more of the students in the CAMS U.S. Government course to vote in favor of the proposed amendment. Yet, no matter how my students argued, over 2/3’s of the students in Mr. Almeida’s opposed my students’ call to make it easier to amend the Constitution. As a result, my students

learned a very simple lesson – just because an overwhelming majority of seniors here at San Marino High School may think one way, it doesn't mean an overwhelming majority of seniors throughout the country think the same.

Students from Brawley Union High School For this video conference, students enrolled in one of Brawley's U.S. Government courses (taught by Mr. Jose Flores) were interviewed by students in one of my U.S. Government courses. The Brawley students were asked a number of questions on various policy proposals related to teens. Questions included: (1) Do you think that the voting age should be reduced to 16 for city elections; (2) Do you think the bicyclists over the age of 18 should be required by law to wear a helmet; (3) Do you think that minors who drive a motor vehicle should be required by law to have a fully-functioning dash cam while driving? (4) Do you think marijuana should be legalized for recreational purposes for those over the age of 18? These topics led to a very lively discussion between students from two vastly different parts of the state getting together to share their thoughts and opinions on questions related to teenagers and public policy. On some things the students agreed; on others they didn't.

Students from Mclean (VA) High School and Jenison (MI) High School As part of Tony Blair's "Face to Faith" program, students in my U.S. Government course connected, via a Face to Faith moderated video conference, with students from these two high schools. The students were first asked by the Face to Faith facilitator to give a short description of their community, focusing on that which is unique and special in their community while also pointing out an aspect of their community that they would like to change. This was an ice breaking exercise and the students expressed a great number of different ideas ranging from different cultures in neighborhoods, to homogeneous classes, sports and solidarity amongst peers.

The second part of the videoconference was dedicated to "festivals," and once again both classes had lots of information to share. They looked really proud of their traditions and social events at school or in the family. Most students gave detailed descriptions of these special events that ranged from school sports events, to local festivals, fairs, parades, etc.

Before closing out the video conference, the students were asked to think for one minute and then say what they had learned.

Tony Blair's Face to Faith Program seeks to create tolerant, stable societies, ones where young people possess the knowledge and skills needed to resist extremist voices. This goal could be accomplished, at least in part, by Face to Face's facilitated video conferences.

I look forward to providing my students with more Face-to-Faith video conferencing opportunities next year, though in the future I would prefer that my students get a chance to speak with students in either Asia or Africa. I want my students to encounter far greater cultural differences than they encountered in the video conference with students from Virginia and Michigan.

Adults Willing to Hear Student End of Term Presentations

Judith McConnell is a California Appellate Court Administrative Presiding Justice for the 4th District. For the sake of this end-of-term (video conference) presentation, Justice McConnell presided over a mock U.S. Supreme Court hearing, with one student in my class serving in the role of petitioner, and another student in my class serving in the role of respondent.

The issue before the court was whether or not a school district policy prohibiting Sikh elementary school students from carrying a 'kirpan' on campus violates the free exercise clause of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. A kirpan is a ceremonial sword or dagger carried by baptized Sikhs, one of the five articles of faith they are required by their religion to wear at all times.

This video conference mock U.S. Supreme Court hearing was conducted in an attempt to pilot part of a unit created by Literacy and the Law: Mock Trials to Meet the Common Core State Standards.

The video conference broke new ground, proving that students, from their classroom, can engage in a mock U.S. Supreme Court presentation with a real-life judge presiding over the student's' case from afar.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

For best results during a live, interactive videoconference, I suggest using these video conferencing technologies if possible:

- A computer or laptop (rather than a tablet, ipad or iphone)
- A monitor (preferably a projector and large screen)
- A webcam (preferably an external, wide angle camera)
- A microphone (preferably a tabletop microphone)
- External speakers
- Google+, Hangouts, Zoom, or Skype. Personally, I prefer to use Zoom, but then I had the good fortune of having Cal State, San Marcos take such interest in my video conferencing experimentations over the course of the past two years that they provided me with a free account, as well as free tech support. On the other hand, at least 25% of the video conferences I've described in this article were produced with nothing more than the use of Google+.
- Good bandwidth (DSL and cable connections as well as T-1 lines are excellent options for videoconferencing connections, though fiber-based connections to the internet will significantly improve the quality of the interactions.)
- Cabling to the Internet (rather than connecting wirelessly)

I also suggest formatting the video conference similar to that of a television talk show where:

- The host, preferably a student, opens the video conference by asking a number of introductory questions of the guest(s) before giving the students in the host's class a chance to ask questions of their own.
- The video conference should last no more than an hour, as most individuals are willing to commit to a one-hour time frame. (If you teach multiple periods of the same course, you can simply brief the other classes on the details or alternately, you could record the video conference and then share it with your other periods.)

To ensure that the host and audience members ask the guest(s) high-quality questions during the video conference, teachers should do the following:

- Conduct Internet research to learn as much as possible about your guest, then draft a number of questions for students to ask based on what you learned on the Internet and what was covered in class.
- Share the questions you've drafted with your students, soliciting student volunteers to ask one or more of the questions.
- Explain to the students how and why you created the questions that you did; being sure to leave them with a full understanding of your research strategy and methodology.
- Give your students the opportunity to research and create questions of their own. I prefer to have students show me their questions to be cleared for approval (this is just a personal preference and subject to your discretion).

Above all, I highly suggest working with your school's technology staff well ahead of the scheduled video conference to ensure that all the technology works as it should. The San Marcos technology staff has provided immeasurable support in this regard. So too, the technical support at Cal State, San Marcos.

FINDING CONTENT PROVIDERS

It is quite easy these days to find subject matter experts using internet research tools. A quick way for an educator to find a presenter on most any topic is by searching the content provider database on CILC.org, the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration. There is also a Collaboration database on CILC where educators can find other educators around the world to participate in a program between their two classes.

A FINAL WORD

At the start of the school year two years ago, an administrator said something to me that's worth sharing.

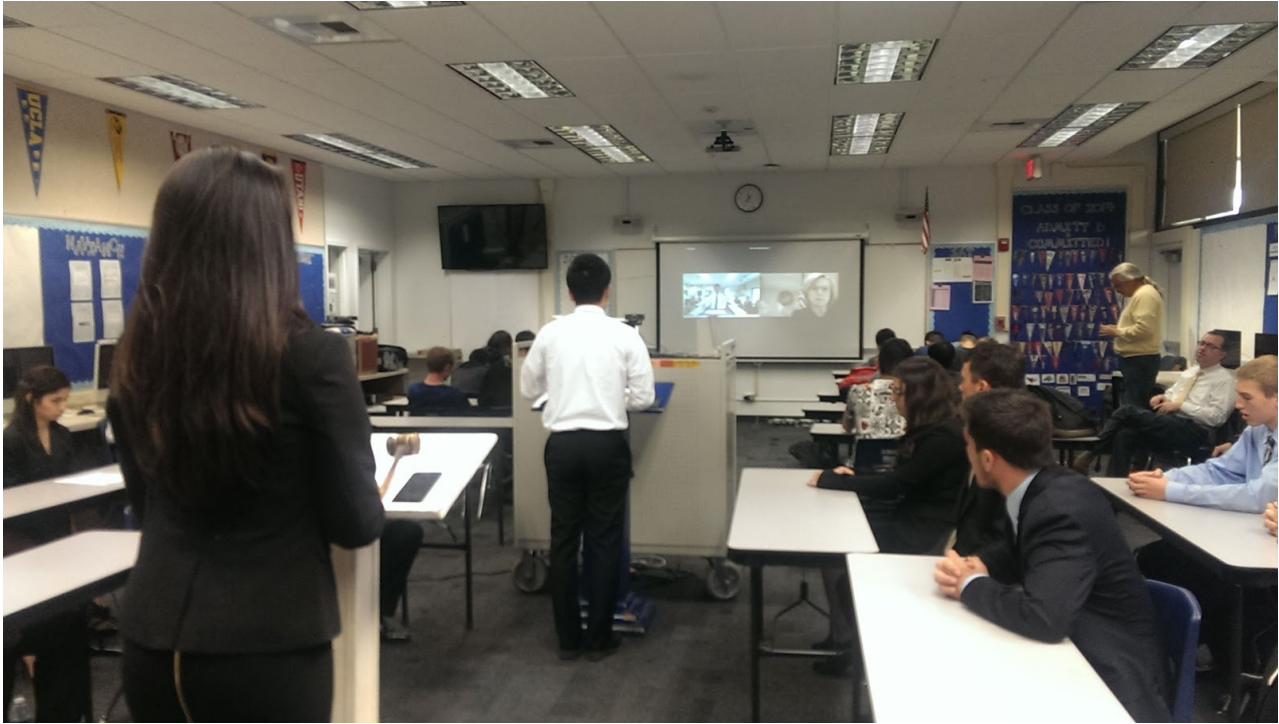
"Just think about it," he said. "In schools K-12 of the past, lessons were limited by the breadth of knowledge imparted by the schoolteacher with the help of a few precious schoolbooks. But today, for the first time in history, teachers can create, with the help of

then went on to say . . . “whether it be in terms of virtual field trips, communicating with field experts, and/or collaborating with students in other schools to share projects and ideas . . . all of this can now be done and, better yet, it can be done with clear images and great sound. And if that doesn’t hook you, just imagine what improvements will be made in terms of this technology within the course of just the next few years.” He then closed by saying, “. . . if one of your primary goals as a teacher is to provide your students with highly rewarding, innovative, and engaging learning opportunities, then providing your students with ample opportunity to use video conferencing technology is something you have to do and do now.”

This recommendation I took to heart and, and with two years of video conferencing experience behind me, I strongly encourage all teachers throughout the country to do the same.



Michael Newdow video conference (2013)



Justice McConnell video conference (2015)