

Audioconference and Distance Learning
Notes from Penny Field (points 1 and 3) and Paul Trebilco (point 2)

1. The role of audioconferences

“ All centers on line, you may go ahead”

Silence, listening, expectancy, waiting...what happens for the next 50mins?

For the students

For us as session leaders?

Our students' learning experiences are influenced by a number of factors; one we have some influence over is how audio conferences are used.

Let's explore the role(s) of audioconferences.

Invite people who have led audioconferences before to tell us about how they conduct an audio conference...what do you do after Yvette or Peter have cued you in?

Roll call, discussions, report backs

Tutorial approach is common

- assume content is in coursework book notes and readings
- the audioconference is used to assist students in interpreting this material
- it is an approach which can draw upon the students formal and experiential knowledge.

Typical tutorial activities include

- Working through a problem or case study
- Discussion on readings,
- students asks questions, seek clarification, and compare their interpretation with others.
- Student presentations followed by class discussions
- Debates
- Reflection on practical activities.

The role of session leader is facilitatory.

What other approaches to using audioconference are successful?

- Using an expert to contribute to the audioconference
- Audiovisual material, PowerPoint's etc
- Student-led discussions

Make sure all instructions are clear and given in advance, in writing or at the preceding session.

What is the role of the printed course workbook material?

- provides structure for the sessions
- gives learning objectives
- gives content

- reading and references

In summary we have choices about the purpose of our audio conferences;

- Tutorials
- Expert presentations/ contributions/ question and answer sessions
- student-led discussions

Adult learners...implicit or explicit contract

| Student | Lecturer |
|--|--|
| Understandable material | Relevant up to date material |
| Realistic workload | Realistic workload evenly spread |
| Logical development of structure | Provides a logical structure |
| Undertakes pre reading | Offers tutorials to cover student concerns |
| Assessment criteria transparent and fair | Prepared |
| Structured lectures | Uses a variety of learning methods |
| Key question and objectives covered | Establishes learning objectives |
| Time for group discussions | Clear instructions for tutorial activities |
| Meet assessment dates | Confidentiality |
| | Keeps to time |

2. What are the challenges we face as teachers in audioconferences?

One vital thing that we are trying to achieve is for students to interact with each other. The design of the coursebook is crucial here - so that students are able to come to the audioconference well prepared, knowing what sort of questions they will be asked. So it is very helpful if the coursebook contains an "Agenda" for each audioconference session, outlining the main questions that will be discussed and making it clear what material the student should read and think about before the session.

Then the challenges for us as teachers consist of getting discussion started, and dealing with under-contribution, or over-contribution.

Getting discussion started

It is helpful if all students are asked to introduce themselves at the beginning of the first audioconference. They can be asked where they live, perhaps what they do (if this is a professional paper related to employment for example), or why they are interested in the paper and what they hope to get from it. This has the advantage of "breaking the ice", and getting students used to the microphone.

Then it should be clear from your Agenda what you should go on to next.

Dealing with under-contribution

Sometimes there is a lot of silence during an audioconference. This can be caused by a whole range of factors

- reticence with the audioconference technology;
- lack of preparation by the students (perhaps because a piece of internal assessment has been due that week and they haven't had time to prepare for the audioconference as well);
- that the material for the audioconference was too difficult and they are all lost in their preparation;
- that you have not given them enough specific guidance in the coursebook;
- that they have not understood the question you have asked
- that the group of students simply contains few talkers and so on.

It is helpful to try and determine **why** there is reticence to contribute - which may lead to a quick solution. And think too about how much discussion you can reasonably expect; perhaps if half the group contributed to the audioconference that would be a good result? After all, what level of contribution would you expect in a face-to-face discussion or tutorial? If however, the problem is the material you have given them in the coursebook, then the problem will be hard to fix quickly!

But there are ways to encourage students to join in discussion:

- say that you are going to have 1 minute (or longer) of silence (time it) when you'd like everyone to think about the following question. Get them to jot down a few thoughts during the silence, and tell them that after the silence is over you would like someone in a particular venue, or say the north island, or someone who has not contributed tonight yet, to start off the discussion by giving an answer to the question. The advantage of this method is that it gives those who are not quite so quick to respond to a question the chance to "gather their thoughts".
- you could ask students to volunteer to answer a question, or respond to a reading at the next audioconference. This gives them the chance to prepare thoroughly.
- you can address particular questions to particular centres, or particular people. The latter is not popular with students however!
- you can ask a question and then ask that someone who has not spoken yet during the session gives an answer to it.
- you can set up a debate like this: Pose a question, and then say that you would like two people to argue for it, and two against (for example). Ask for volunteers, and then give everyone a few minutes to prepare, off-line. Then have the debate, and after it is over, ask for additional points from others that the debaters have not covered. Or you could say you wanted a debate during the next session (or better still, put it in your coursebook as part of the "Agenda") and ask for volunteers.

But silence can be helpful - resist the temptation to always jump in and answer your own question if no one else is talking. Remember that the audioconference is not suited to lecturing (at least not most of the time) and that you really do want to get people talking. But try some of the above ways to help students talk.

Dealing with over-contribution by a few students

Sometimes a handful of students (or just one or two) dominate an audioconference. Other students will quickly tire of the over-contributors, particularly if they are not giving relevant answers, so as teachers we also need to have strategies to address this issue.

- One way is to say that for this next question, you would like a response from someone who hasn't contributed yet during the session.
- Or you may need to be more direct: "Thank you to those who have contributed a good deal to our session thus far. But perhaps those people could refrain from answering the next few questions so that others have the chance to contribute."
- Or if the problem becomes really acute, you may need to ring the person concerned up outside of the audioconference, explain the difficulty you are having as a teacher ("I'm concerned that others are not getting a chance ...") and ask them to refrain from speaking for a good while.

Some other points about managing audioconference

- really listen to students' responses. Because we don't have the visual cues that go with face-to-face teaching, you sometimes need to really "listen between the lines" to pick up underlying issues a student may be facing. Perhaps they are really lost (perhaps the course is at the wrong level for them), or perhaps they are facing some pastoral issue that needs to be addressed somehow (perhaps by a call outside of the audioconference).
- for a two hour audioconference it's important to have a break half way through, to revive energy levels.
- time management is crucial. If you only get through half of the "Agenda" for the session, then in the next audioconference sessions some students may only prepare half the material, in anticipation that you will again only get through half the Agenda. So give yourself a timetable for how you will cover what you would like to cover in the session and endeavour to stick to it. This is only fair to those who have prepared for the whole Agenda too.
- getting students to present their ideas, or a summary of a reading, or an essay at an audioconference is worthwhile, particularly at advanced levels.
- ask a more experienced audioconference teacher to come along and give you some feedback with regard to how you are doing in the audioconference.
- be honest in your answers to students' questions, or when giving feedback to their answers. Because you can't see the students, the temptation is there to be neutral to answers that are simply wrong (ie to say "That's an interesting idea .. what do others think?", when the answer is totally inadequate). It is probably better to be frank - "Actually, no that's very unlikely/wrong, because"

3. We have choices about the distance teaching medium we use. Audio conference and or Blackboard are the two most popular options.

Strengths of each

Audio conference

Spontaneity

Community together at same time

Human contact – voice, tone, ability to convey enthusiasm

Responsive, probe, hear the uncertainty

Learn by listening, speaking

Group work

Blackboard

Options about how to use it, discussion board, PowerPoint etc

Portal to an enormous number of web resources

Flexibility time of day / place

ESL students with good keyboard skills make confident contributions.

Record of discussions for future reference

Many assessment features available.