



Web Conferencing and Collaboration You Can Afford and Enjoy

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Session Description:

Thanks to increased Internet speed and access, we can talk, chat and even collaborate with other people without leaving our desk or picking up a phone – but the choices of Internet meeting services vary widely and can be very expensive. WebArrow is a powerful low-cost service that lets educators meet over the Internet, share reports, co-edit documents and talk in groups of 2 to 100 and more surprisingly with little complication. No uploading. No special installations. Free month's subscription for up to 5 people at a time for every person who attends (value \$30).

Choosing the Web Conferencing Tool to Suit Your Needs

Many web meeting tools are available already and more are arriving, each with its set of features and capabilities. The key to determining which tool better meets your needs is to determine what you want to achieve and to discriminate as to how well each tool helps you meet that goal.

It is not just a question of features but how the tool is orientated. Some tools are clearly designed as presentation tools while others have the flexibilities required for broader applications. Sometimes the more subtle differences have the larger impact on how you use the tool.

The following terminology distinctions will help you get started.

Web Conferencing Vs. Video Conferencing

In a video conference, individuals and groups talk to teach other while cameras share their images through the Internet. Video conferencing can range from one-to-one video discussions with MSN messenger, to using state-of-the-art video conferencing labs with dedicated video conferencing services.

In a web conference, the meeting focuses on a shared work or works such as a report, analysis or project. Sharing a computer desktop is a critical function. The participants focus their attention on viewing and possibly co-editing a shared work. In a web conference, the service features related to desktop and document sharing are the more important elements to consider.

Web Presenting Vs. Web Collaboration

In a web presentation, a single individual presents information to many listeners and viewers. Some web conferencing tools are propelled by the vision that subject experts will talk and present to us through web conferencing tools. This vision is one valid use of web conferencing capability but can be a limiting paradigm if the tool's designers do not think outside this paradigm.

In a web collaboration, participants gather as active contributors to a conversation about a shared piece of work. Depending on the capabilities of the web collaboration tool in use, all participants may directly edit or contribute to a shared project. All participants may take leading or following roles and all participants may share documents and files.

Telephone Vs. VoIP

Voice over IP (VoIP) is the ability to carry conversation over the Internet real-time, which has become far more reliable and of higher quality in recent years and months. Some web conferencing tools include VoIP while others offer VoIP at an additional cost, or they offer the ability to have meeting participants call a common phone number.

At first blush, VoIP and telephone conferencing can appear to be alternatives to each other, equal in any other regard except the technology. In addition to cost savings on long distance calls, the use of VoIP offers several distinct advantages over conventional telephone:

- With VoIP, participants do not need a phone near the computer – a critical issue in most school settings.
- With VoIP, participants can individually contribute to the meeting and do not have to meet in groups around a shared conference phone.
- Most people use a headset connected to the computer, so participants can gesture with their mouse or keyboard information without awkwardly having to hold a phone set and communicate at the same time.
- Depending on the web conference tool, participants in larger meetings can “raise their hands” to speak and the meeting can be moderated effectively because audio communication is an integral part of the meeting.

All the above factors significantly affect the dynamic of the meeting so the presence or absence of affordable VoIP is a significant factor when choosing collaboration tools.

How Web Conferencing Relates to the Illinois State Curriculum: English/Language Arts

STATE GOAL 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

- A. Use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization and structure.**
- B. Compose well-organized and coherent writing for specific purposes and audiences.**
- C. Communicate ideas in writing to accomplish a variety of purposes.**

Learning to write is an interactive iterative process that can be dramatically accelerated when students meet to critique each other's writing or students meet with teachers and writing experts to critique writing. Web conferencing can be a powerful medium that allows this process to happen in an environment where written work is easily edited and improved while writing strategies are discussed. Web conferencing is a distance educator's dream come true but its application is not limited to distance education. The low cost of some modern web conferencing tools allows students to collaborate from desk to desk as easily as they can county to county.

STATE GOAL 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

- A. Listen effectively in formal and informal situations.**
- B. Speak effectively using language appropriate to the situation and audience.**

What we communicate, how we communicate and how well we communicate is a direct function of the tools we are using. As we become more globally distributed and as we look for more efficient ways to meet without traveling and consuming fuel, web conferencing will be an increasingly more common mode of meeting. Effective communicators will need to know the nuances and subtleties of the web conferencing environment if they are to make this new medium work for them.

STATE GOAL 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess and communicate information.

- A. Locate, organize, and use information from various sources to answer questions, solve problems and communicate ideas.**
- B. Analyze and evaluate information acquired from various sources.**
- C. Apply acquired information, concepts and ideas to communicate in a variety of formats.**

As suggested above, web conferencing will become a more common tool for meeting, collaborating, sharing information, and developing knowledge as time goes on. Like any tool, students must know when and when not to use web conferencing tools, what kind of web conferencing tool is appropriate for a situation, and how the tool affects the course of communication. Conversely, students need to know how to manage web conference meetings. All this suggests that web conferencing tools should be used within the communications curriculum.

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