

# AFS Folklore and Education Section Newsletter



Spring 2008

## Feature: Conducting interviews via videoconference

by Eric Miller

We folklorists are very sensitive to the importance of place. While videoconferencing does not negate the importance of place, it certainly throws some twists into the discussion.

K-12 videoconferencing is a rapidly expanding phenomenon; tens of thousands of schools now have active videoconference facilities. K-12 videoconferences are sometimes referred to as "virtual field trips," allowing students to, from afar, receive lessons from cultural institutions, meet with other students, and even interview tradition-bearers.

A well-designed videoconference can almost give participants the sense that they are in the same room. Below are some tips for creating conditions for successful videoconference interviews.

The placelessness of institutional videoconference rooms can be overcome in a number of ways, such as pointing one's camera out the window; switching to a second camera on the roof; and playing video recordings or showing photographs of local everyday life (accompanied by live commentary perhaps).

In a videoconference interview—especially if the interviewee is telling about a community and a tradition of which she is a member—it is often a good idea for the interviewee to be accompanied by other members of her community. Nothing creates a sense of place like a community of people.

One never wants interviewees to feel that they are on exhibit, like animals in a zoo, or objects in a museum. In tele-present interviews, as in physically-present ones, interviewees should feel free to ask questions of their interviewers.



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## AFS Folklore and Education Section Newsletter

Spring 2008








When people meet via videoconference, they sometimes feel that their distant partners are a bit "off." One factor that can cause this sense of disjuncture is time delay. Often, it takes a half-second for one's sound-and-image to reach the other party, and then another half-second for that party's sound-and-image to reach one. Thus, one's distant partner may constantly be responding a second late. One way for participants to get a clear sense of the time delay is: Someone at Site A sings, and someone at Site B sings along. At Site B, the voices will be synchronized; but at Site A, the voice from Site B will be coming a half-second behind. Then, reverse roles.

Another frequent cause of disjuncture in videoconferences is lack of eye contact. If one's camera is above one's screen, and one is looking at one's screen, one's camera will produce an image of one looking downward. Ways to counteract this include moving further away from one's screen and camera; placing one's camera in front of one's screen; and looking directly into one's camera.

When an interviewee is speaking, she needs to be speaking to someone. Thus, it might be helpful for the interviewee to have a close-up one-on-one visual relationship with a single interviewer. Other interviewers can speak from off camera, or can temporarily, or subsequently, come into the frame. Another way to indicate who the primary speaker and listener are is for a feather, stick, or other object to be placed in front of these individuals.

Full-body shots are valuable especially for the demonstration of gestures, walking styles, and dance moves. For optimum flexibility of camera use, the human body, and videoconference-room space, it is best to not have any obstacles—such as large tables—in the center of the rooms. Instead of having the camera constantly panning, tilting, and zooming, it may at times work to keep the camera stationary, and have students move into and out of the frame.

It is often helpful to let a videoconference interviewee know that one has heard and absorbed what she has just said. One way to do this is to repeat what was just said, and incorporate that into one's next question or comment. For example, "I hear you saying [such-and-such]. Is this always the case?"

 Feature
  New Resources
  AFS News
  Home
  Workshops
  Section to Section
  Book Corner



http://www.afsnet.org/sections/education/Spring2008/

ICAT g-group ICAT\_mail SAS\_mail WSI\_mail New York Times Huffington Post Common Dreams Democracy Now

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Spring 2008

In multi-party videoconferences, thought should be put into how the videoconference windows will be configured on one's own and on one's distant partners' screens. Many videoconference systems enable the speaker's image to automatically appear full-screen for all of the other participants to see—but this prevents participants from seeing how people at the other sites are responding to the speaker. Another option is to divide the screen into a grid of windows: in this case, one sees smaller images, but the situation is stable and information-rich. Usually the screen configuration can be changed in the course of a videoconference, so alternation between options is possible.

To discuss the form and content of a videoconference, participants might want to communicate before and/or after the event via e-mail and/or other means. It may be helpful to put aspects of the meeting (including agenda and schedule, and photos and other material submitted in advance) on a shared Web site.

### Getting Started: Resources

Free software such as Skype on a personal computer with a broadband Internet connection can be used for surprisingly-good-quality videoconferencing (some new laptops have a camera built-in, above the screen). For more elaborate videoconferencing, specialized equipment is needed.

A growing number of individuals and institutions offer classroom experiences via videoconference: see <http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/vidconf/directory.cfm> and <http://tinyurl.com/4cj6t>.

Internet2 (<http://www.internet2.edu>), a new generation of the Internet, enables excellent-quality multi-party videoconferencing. I2 is a university-based initiative: one of its most exciting applications is in the K-12 field: see <http://k20.internet2.edu> and <http://k20.internet2.edu/getstarted/k-12>.

The I2 Teaching and Learning Special Interest Group (<http://www.internet2.edu/teach>) co-chairs are Jennifer Oxenford ([jmacdoug@isc.upenn.edu](mailto:jmacdoug@isc.upenn.edu)) and Marty Siegel ([msiegel@indiana.edu](mailto:msiegel@indiana.edu)).

Feature    New Resources    AFS News    Home    Workshops    Section to Section    Book Corner



http://www.afsnet.org/sections/education/Spring2008/

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The I2 Teaching and Learning Special Interest Group (<http://www.internet2.edu/teach>) co-chairs are Jennifer Oxenford ([jimacdoug@isc.upenn.edu](mailto:jimacdoug@isc.upenn.edu)) and Marty Siegel ([msiegel@indiana.edu](mailto:msiegel@indiana.edu)).

Ms. Oxenford is assistant director of MAGPI, the Mid-Atlantic Gigapop in Philadelphia for Internet2, at <http://www.magpi.net>, a group that facilitates educational videoconferencing in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. She is also a lead organizer of the annual Megaconference Jr., a 12-hour marathon showcase videoconference which is webcast live, consisting of many brief K-12-related videoconferences (<http://www.megaconferencejr.org>). This is a spin-off of the annual Megaconference (<http://www.megaconference.org>).

The Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration, advancing learning through videoconferencing and other collaborative technologies," originally served Indiana, and now is national: <http://www.cilc.org>.

Minnesota is a hotspot for K-12 videoconferencing: see <http://www.ties.k12.mn.us> and [http://www.informns.k12.mn.us/MN\\_K-12\\_Internet2\\_Day.html](http://www.informns.k12.mn.us/MN_K-12_Internet2_Day.html).

One leading K-12 videoconference facilitator is Janine Lim (<http://www.janinelim.com>). She teaches an online course about K-12 videoconferencing: "Kid2Kid Videoconference Connections": <http://www.remc11.k12.mi.us/dl/k2k>.

Information about the annual K-12 "Holiday Traditions" I2 videoconference is available at <http://www.cermusa.francis.edu/holidaycon>.

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Feature    New Resources    AFS News    Home    Workshops    Section to Section    Book Corner