The Internet-Telephone Interview as a Classroom Teaching Tool

By Don Lotter

The in-class telephone interview is discussed as a teaching tool that adds an additional active learning dimension to a classroom environment. Students can actively engage in dialogue with the interviewee. The internet, such as the interviewee's webpage, can be used to enhance the dialogue.

One of my most valuable teaching tools is the in-class telephone interview, in which the interviewee's voice is amplified to the class and his or her webpage or other documents are projected onscreen and discussed. Scientists, scholars, news-makers—almost anyone who can be reached by email or phone—will generally consent to a 15-minute telephone interview (most of mine go on for 40 minutes). The possibilities for interviews are endless, from a graduate seminar interviewing a scientist to a first-grade teacher talking to the leopard-keeper at the zoo.

Methodology

I originally developed the in-class telephone interview for my very small agriculture classes at Imperial Valley College using a speakerphone and a 100-foot long phone cable strung to the nearest compliant staff or faculty office. My half-dozen students would gather around the speakerphone to listen and ask questions. This approach may still be the best way to go for teachers with small classes who don't want to deal with internet telephony.

With high-speed internet in the classroom, internet telephone interviews can be easily conducted using low-cost services such as Skype (*www.skype.com*), the popular internet telephone service. (Internet telephony is also known as Voice over Internet Protocol [VoIP]). Skype has been used in educational settings for research collaboration and student communication (Branzburg 2007). Skype can call any telephone for just a few cents per minute (2.1 cents in the United States, 5 to 50 cents per minute worldwide). Because of its low cost, I don't bother using Skype's free computer-to-computer talk mode. I also use my own Skype account and funds so that I don't have to bother with departmental accounting.

Nor do I bother with trying to set things up to show the interviewee's "talking head"; receiving a simple phone call is best. We want to minimize the time and trouble the interviewee needs to take to do the interview. It is better, in my experience, to use the classroom screen to project the interviewee's picture and webpage onto the screen and use it to discuss the interviewee's topic of focus. Taking a digital photo of the class (with students' consent) and emailing it to the interviewee to see who he/she is talking to might be something I do in the future.

Skype is easy to install on a computer. Perhaps the best way is just to install it on your own laptop, test it (always thoroughly test before going live!), and then connect the laptop in the classroom. Three connections are necessary for your laptop in the classroom: the network (internet), the monitor (to the projector), and the audio to the speakers. You'll need a microphone that plugs into the computer, and you'll need to make test calls to make sure the speakers amplify enough for the class to hear, but not so much that the microphone picks it up and you get feedback. I cradle the microphone in my hand in a way that minimizes its picking up the speaker sound. I've been using Skype for calls from my home office for a couple of years now and have had very few problems. Normally one uses ear phones for these calls.

For those who want the simplicity and reliability of the cell phone, or who lack a good internet connection, it wouldn't be very hard to do an interview using an amplifier and microphone to project the audio of the cell phone on speakerphone mode. However, the quality of the sound is unlikely to be as good as that from Skype on a high-speed connection. The cell phone's speakerphone feature is generally not strong enough to project to a classroom by itself.

Conclusion

Most recently, I interviewed a botanist friend, John, who conducts ecological assessment studies around California. The students really perked up when someone other than myself, a video, or YouTube was doing the talking. We projected onto the screen a document from the interviewee's website.

The author conducting a telephone interview in his botany class via Internet telephone. A map from the interviewee's webpage of rare extant native California bunchgrass locations is projected onto the screen as the interviewee describes his discovery of the grasses.

He related the geology of a particular area he had inventoried and how it was important to the existence of what he discovered was the largest extant community of native California bunchgrasses ever found (California grasslands have been almost completely taken over by livestock-tolerant Mediterranean grasses). We could see the location on a detailed map on his website that related the geology to the botany, and we could view photos of the site.

John then talked about the vernal pool ecology of California's Central Valley, and how he had just spent the day hiking in the hills with a butterfly net making $150 an hour. "Now that", one student said, "opened some eyes."

To have an enthusiastic professional relate important course content in a way that stimulated students has been an important addition to my classes, and with such a small investment—no major time sacrifices, travel issues, funding, etc. I will be using the in-class telephone interview a lot more, and I encourage teachers of all levels to try it just once—I think you'll be hooked.

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