

Teaching across a 'telephone bridge'

by John Creed

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KOTZEBUE — I teach for the University of Alaska, but unlike most professors, I rarely meet all my students. In fact, I often don't ever know what many of them look like.

No, I don't teach correspondence. Rather, it's called "distance education" via audioconference. Though not a particularly new teaching method, some Alaskans have never heard of this kind of education even though the university relies heavily on it to reach remote students in rural Alaska.

Through distance education, students attend class over a University of Alaska audioconference system using telephone switchboards called "bridges" in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kotzebue and other locations statewide.

Students and the instructor call into the bridge for each class. Everyone can hear and talk to everyone else, even if classmates live a thousand miles apart.

For instance, in one of my classes this semester, taught from Kotzebue in the Northwest Arctic Borough, I have four students in the Bristol Bay area, two out on the Aleutians, three on the Kuskokwim River, one on the Yukon, one each in Tok, Fairbanks and Barrow and three here in Kotzebue.

These 15 technical/grant writing students and I connect for class twice a week through this audioconference bridge system. We're all hooked together, of course, by satellite.

Sometimes, an instructor might not even know why some students got cut off halfway through class until they call the next day to say, for example, that they had a power outage in their village and the telephone lines went dead. Other times, the audioconference equipment might pick up a stray CB radio in town or you just get a plain bad satellite connection that disrupts the whole class.

Another aspect of not being able to meet face-to-face with students to explain problems is that it requires many instructors, especially writing teachers, to conduct time-consuming major "surgery" on student papers, sometimes using more ink than the student used to complete the original assignment.

Surely we could cite other disadvantages for student and instructor alike, but this teaching method enjoys far more advantages when you realize that audioconferenced distance education is the most effective way to reach the broad spectrum of higher education seekers in rural Alaska.

When the University of Alaska statewide system restructured a couple years ago, the University of Alaska Fairbanks expanded its service area through its newly created College of Rural Alaska to reach south to the Aleutians, east to the Canadian border, north to Barrow and west to St. Lawrence Island just across from the Soviet Union.

Today, UAF and its rural sites are now offering distance courses throughout this vast service area, coordinated by UAF's Center for Distance Education in Fairbanks. That's why these "cross-regional" courses draw students from so many remote places in Alaska.

As one might imagine, teaching in such a huge classroom requires tremendous organization and commitment from faculty and staff alike. For example, mailing assignments back and forth quickly across these great expanses has offered a real challenge.

Enter the telefax revolution. As a cross-regional instructor teaching writing courses that require immediate and frequent feedback to students, I have come to regard the FAX machine as indispensable.

Students also enjoy the unique flexibility that audioconferenced distance education offers. For example, some rural students travel a lot either for their jobs or for personal reasons. No problem. They can call into class, at least technically, from anywhere in the world.

One student last semester spent a week in Anchorage with her sick daughter. The little girl's mother didn't miss class, though. She just called in from the hospital.

On the teaching side, a guest lecturer, such as a university librarian assisting students with research, can

join the class from any phone, with or without audioconference equipment.

With distance education, the university truly serves students in every corner of Alaska, and for good reason. Many rural students simply cannot leave their communities to study on campus because of family, political and/or social obligations. Or, it's simply too expensive.

Typically, rural college students are married women in their late 20s and 30s, holding down a full-time job. They usually have at least two children, too, but manage to complete from three to nine credits a semester. Distance education is often the only reasonable way for these and other students to gain access to higher education.

For instance, one student on the tiny Pribilof Islands way out in the Bering

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Sea in Southwest Alaska has taken nearly 75 percent of her college courses "over the telephone." She will complete her associate's degree this semester and plans to travel to Fairbanks for the graduation ceremony in May.

Maybe I'll go, too. At least I'll see what the heck she looks like.

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