

# The Evolution of Web Conferencing

EDUCAUSE Evolving Technologies Committee  
Kelvin Bentley, Northampton Community College  
Sharon Collins, East Carolina University

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## **Introduction:**

Web conferencing, interacting with individuals over the web is certainly not new, but the capabilities have expanded so much, it is now an extremely viable means of communication. The ability to communicate with others in real time has been enhanced by the availability of robust Web conferencing tools. Such functionality can be found on a basic level in instant messaging programs. For example, AOL Instant Messenger provides the ability for text messaging with friends and family along with additional tools such as webcam and Voice-over-IP (VoIP) integration.

More-advanced Web conferencing tools can provide users with additional features that can enhance synchronous communication in small or large groups. Products such as Saba Centra, Elluminate Live, Wimba Live Classroom, and Adobe Acrobat Connect Professional allow users to share ideas with whiteboards, online polls, file and application sharing, and web page "pushing." Such options expand the range of information that can be shared during online sessions, which can be archived using these Web conferencing programs.

## ***Why Is Web Conferencing Important to Higher Education?***

Web conferencing can be used in various ways to enhance students' experiences within higher education. An on-campus instructor could use web conferencing to have additional class time with his or her students outside of the physical classroom. This could be useful when the instructor is unable to come to campus to hold regular class periods or when the campus is closed due to bad weather or an emergency. In addition, faculty could expand office hours by scheduling online time with students to answer questions about assignments or the course in general, to provide supplemental instruction, or to give feedback on course performance. Students in higher education are dispersed throughout different geographical locations and web conferencing provides these individuals with a communication medium.

Distance-learning courses could benefit from the occasional or regular use of web conferencing. Online courses are popular because faculty and students can communicate asynchronously using e-mail and discussion boards. With web conferencing, online students can give live presentations to either the instructor or fellow classmates, and the presentations can be recorded and archived so that students

can review their presentations and learn ways to improve their performance. Such an outcome is easily possible given Web conferencing tools can be integrated within an institution's learning management system.

Professional development training for faculty and staff can be enhanced by the use of web conferencing tools. Webinars can be created by a college or university to share important information about new policies and procedures or to help a center for teaching and learning conduct presentations for faculty about best practices in the organization and facilitation of on-campus and distance-learning courses and the assessment of learning in such courses. Web conferencing can be used to host such trainings, and audiences can be both face-to-face and online with prior planning around the use of such technology. In addition, the ability to share such information with faculty and staff is maximized because the presentations can be archived for later viewing.

### *How Is Web Conferencing Evolving?*

The technology itself has changed from what was available only ten years ago. In the past, classroom video-conferencing equipment could be housed only in designated classrooms; today, software can be accessed from a server so that an individual can join a web conference if he or she has a desktop or laptop computer and can share audio and video with the addition of a microphone and a webcam. Access is improved further by companies such as Elluminate, which has created vRoom, a free Elluminate Live version that can be used by up to three people for web conferencing. Such tools will help increase the ubiquity of web conferencing. Even basic instant messaging clients such as MSN and Google Talk now have the capability to launch video and audio instantaneously.

The uses for web conferencing programs are evolving along with the technology. Student services are being offered through web conferencing tools. For example, Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is using web conferencing products such as Elluminate Live to host virtual open houses facilitated by admissions staff and faculty. Other institutions are using web conferencing tools for course instruction. For example, East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, offers construction management, nursing, safety classes, art, and many others with Saba Centra: students feel as if they are in a real-time environment. The expanded experience includes the use of webcams which are taken to job sites to provide a visual aid in learning. In addition, web conferencing allow guest lectures to share their experiences in online and on-campus courses when such individuals would normally not be able to participate in such courses given their geographic location.

Some colleges and universities are using web conferencing to provide online tutoring services for their students. Northampton Community College and the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium use Elluminate Live and Adobe Connect Professional, respectively, to provide synchronous online tutoring to students. Although online tutoring can be outsourced to companies such as Smarthinking, colleges and

universities are finding ways to provide an existing student service with web conferencing tools.

### *Conclusion*

Web conferencing provides a way for individuals and groups to bridge distances and to communicate in exciting new ways. Important questions must be answered as we continue our use of web conferencing. One question should be what new features will be added to web conferencing in the future and will they have a positive impact on student learning? For example, it would be interesting to facilitate web conferences over mobile devices such as cell phones and PDAs, and then examine whether the integration of such devices with web conferencing tools can positively enhance learning outside of a physical classroom or workplace.

Web conferencing will continue to be an evolving technology as long as it remains a viable option for education and industry to offer instruction and training in a way that reduces the time and money associated with face-to-face interaction.