

## Using epresence in Distance Learning



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Having taught an elective course called Advocacy and Library Issues at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information in the "traditional" face-to-face mode (including lectures, discussions and group presentations) to Master of Information Studies (MISt) students, I was intrigued by the prospect of converting the course to distance delivery mode. To be honest, I approached the conversion with some trepidation, as the course entails rich discussion, and student response to it is often intensely – and positively - personal. However, the growing importance of accessible and flexible delivery of library and information science education and the Faculty's interest in developing and sharing courses in new ways were more compelling than my jitters, and I embarked on the redesign of the course in 2005. I had the great good fortune to work closely with course designer and Internet consultant Gwen Harris, who had designed and presented excellent courses for the Faculty's Professional Learning Centre (its continuing education arm), and had excellent in-house technical support from Tony Lemmens.

At that time, my familiarity with ePresence was limited to the viewing of archived lectures by various guests at the Faculty. Early on, Gwen identified its substantial potential as a means to present the core lecture content of the course. Students would be able to see and hear their own instructor, access PowerPoints that captured the major points, view lectures at their own convenience, and re-view them, or selected

sections of them, at any time. The videos would simply be linked to each week of the course in the Blackboard course management software supported by the University. The "package" for each weekly session would combine video lectures, readings, exercises, and discussion of an assigned "question of the week". Teleconferences arranged at the beginning, middle, and end of each semester would gather participants at the same time for direct interaction to supplement the frequent interaction in the discussion threads on the course site.

The creation of the actual texts of lectures and PowerPoints to be offered via ePresence took more time than I'd expected, but this of course is part and parcel of the teaching experience. You can always improve upon what you have created, but at some point, it is essential to wrap it up, let it go, and move on to the next topic. The little tangents and asides that one can make without fear of being misunderstood in a face-to-face setting are more problematic in a recorded medium, so I had to give them up. Nor can the instructor refer to the news of the day, as one would in a traditional classroom, as such references cannot be assumed to make sense in a later viewing of the video. To add time-limited or more casual points, I sent weekly emails to the class, commenting on their recent assignments (although comments on specific assignments were, of course, limited to direct personal emails or phone calls), their contributions to the discussion threads in the Blackboard site, or citing news stories of particular relevance to the course. Since the beginning of online delivery, the course has been offered to other Canadian programs in library and information science, including the University of Western Ontario, Dalhousie University, and the University of Alberta. Therefore, even comments about the "home" university of the class members were relegated to emails and omitted from lectures. Tony Lemmens and Gwen Harris did some highly creative work on lighting and other "recording studio" considerations in the absence

of a real studio, even developing an ersatz "teleprompter" system that helped to avoid long, awkward pauses and the dreaded "um . . . um.. ."

One of the real strengths of the course has always been the availability of distinguished guest lecturers with experience and insight on library advocacy. Rather than ask them to speak into a camera, with no real audience, we recorded the guests' sessions as one-on-one interviews. It worked well for both guests and students, who were able to ask questions of the guests through discussion threads in Blackboard after viewing the video interviews.

Eager to have student reaction and suggestions, we have conducted mid-semester and end of term feedback surveys each time the course has been offered. The availability of the video lectures and interviews has been affirmed consistently. These comments, drawn from the mid-term survey of the Winter 2008 term, are typical of student response.

"I am very happy with the video lectures plus the powerpoint as this method of instruction allows replay and it is possible if you miss a point to find it again easily."

"I find the video lectures with powerpoint to be just as effective as in-class lecture methods."

"The powerpoint slides and epresence lectures are great."

The course does not yet exploit the full potential of epresence, which can be used for live remote viewing. At the moment, there appears to be a strong student preference for asynchronous delivery, however. This may well be a reflection of their busy lives and demanding schedules. But it is clear that epresence has a substantial and positive role in student learning, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to work with the next generation of librarians.