

POWERFUL VIDEOCONFERENCING

EVALUATION REPORT

BIRMINGHAM, MAY 2007

INTRODUCTION

The report below reflects on the 2007 Socrates-Arion conference held in Birmingham, UK titled *Powerful Videoconferencing*. The report consists of 6 parts pertaining to the following areas:

- 1) background and initial expectations of the participants and organisers
- 2) questions and problems resulting from meetings and sessions
- 3) developed ideas and devised solutions
- 4) possible follow-up activities and projects
- 5) dissemination of conference outcomes
- 6) aspects to be looked into in the future (not concluded on during the conference)

The report ends with general conclusions and suggestions for educational institutions.

PART I

Initially all the delegates presented briefly their educational environment and problems they would like to investigate. The presentations set the background for meetings and discussions to follow and helped the organisers to focus on particular topics pertaining to education, tutoring, supervision and technology used for educational purposes.

The delegates represented all types of educational institutions ranging from the ministry of education (Turkey) through supervising and training institutions (Spain and Turkey) to secondary schools (Italy, Turkey, Spain and Poland).

The delegates were particularly interested in the following issues:

- how videoconferencing can be applied for everyday teaching /with a special emphasis on SEN and gifted students/ and to teacher training
- what educational problems could be solved thanks to videoconferencing,
- which software and hardware is reliable, safe and school-friendly,
- what technical requirements must be met to guarantee smooth voice and video transfer,
- what are the possible technical and organisational problems connected with videoconferencing
- what are the theoretical and philosophical foundations (if any available at present) behind videoconferencing for education.

The delegates were also interested in what projects could be carried out in the future between the delegates' schools (Spanish, Turkish, Polish, English and Italian); they were also eager to discover how similar Spanish, Turkish, Polish, English and Italian educational systems are in terms of dealing with behavioural problems, organisation of teaching, training in-service teachers (especially vocational subjects - Spain), planning educational policy and using advanced IT technology for educational needs.

The organisers were the representatives of the Athena project – a British initiative aiming at improving the quality and efficiency of education in secondary and primary schools.

The theme of the conference derived basically from videoconferencing to be understood as a tool to support education, target-applied to overcome universal educational problems present in selected (Spanish, Turkish, Polish, English and Italian) schools, that is to say to: attainment, achievement and attendance. The organisers have been using videoconferencing for 7 years to support teachers and headteachers in one secondary and 7 primary schools in the Birmingham educational action zone. For Athena project videoconferencing has been used to provide supportive lessons in literacy and numeracy, complementary classes in advanced maths for gifted students and cross-curricular lessons for general development (e.g. nomads). Through videoconferencing the organisers managed to link schools with other institutions (e.g. Cambridge University, Texas University, museums) and to provide technical support (Polycom) or link schools together (example of this on Tuesday, 22

May between four primary schools in Harbourne Hill, Birmingham , UK). The conferences leading theme did not yet narrow down talks and questions to videoconferencing exclusively; other, general education problems were discussed, especially in a comparative perspective (e.g. age of compulsory education, standards of education, secondary school final examinations, graduation requirements, vocational training)

PART II

During the following three days of the conference (22-25 May) the delegates took part in sessions, listened to lectures, watched presentations, observed lessons, met educational authorities, headteachers and teachers and discussed a number of problems related to videoconferencing, organisation of schoollife and prospective educational projects to be carried out after the conference. The organisers provided comprehensive contexts for the meetings and visits (sessions in different classrooms and schools, schools with different level of attainment, students with different social, cultural and native-language background) and created the atmosphere and setting for creative cooperation between the delegates themselves as well as between the delegates and the organisers (sessions in ICT labs, on-line videoconferences, group and team work, individual one-to-one discussions, cultural support – cuisine, fine arts, music).

All the above meetings, sessions and activities resulted in a number of questions:

- ❑ can the organisation of the delegates schools promote videoconferencing?
- ❑ is it necessary to employ specially trained teachers?
- ❑ does VC teaching demand special skills? What are they and where can teachers train?
- ❑ how can technical problems be solved (transfer speed, quality of voice and video)?
- ❑ Is VC safe in terms of the Internet abuse?
- ❑ is it possible to run regular lessons with British schools for foreign language classes?
- ❑ how can teachers and students deal with stress during VC?
- ❑ is it possible to support Polish, Italian, Spanish and Turkish students learning in British schools under longterm projects?
- ❑ are there less expensive VC solutions that those presented by the organisers?
- ❑ are British teachers/students/authorities likely to cooperate with other European schools (Italian, Spanish, Turkish and Polish)?
- ❑ how to prepare teaching materials for VC?
- ❑ if VC teaching is to be used as remedial teaching what diagnostic tools can be used to assess the initial situation and how evaluate outcomes?

PART III

Working cooperatively, the conference participants agreed that VC teaching is a universal, and truly a powerful tool to be used for educational purposes; its potential should be used and developed to raise students' attainment and boost teachers' competence and teaching skills. The experience and know-how of the Athena authors can and should be spread and used across European schools. The participants agreed that the following steps should be taken to implement VC in schools to deal with universal, cross-european educational issues: These are divided into two groups:

Technology

- cheaper solutions should be used at the beginning (e.g. Polycom PVX)
- only secured and encoded channels are to be used for educational needs for safety reasons, not public open applications (eg. MSN or Skype),
- schools and institutions should look for technical support in the regional representatives and try to use various systems,
- alternative lesson should always be at hand should the VC session be interrupted,
- the *Internet Help Forum* should be created to discuss technical aspects of VC for education,
- VC hardware and software solutions should enable links between various Internet networks

Organisation

- organisation of the participating schools and institutions enables VC cooperation between teachers
- educational policy of the participating countries enables using VC in schools
- cooperation should start with identifying potentials and problems to overcome,
- VC cooperation should follow the following order: individual teachers e-mail contacts, teacher preparatory VC sessions, preparing a sample VC lesson materials (working sheets, internet resources, photographs) on a selected topic, consulting the materials with experts/the organisers, running the lesson and evaluation,
- local educational institutions should be informed about the potential and benefits of using VC (sessions, internet site, talks to the local authorities and head teachers in Italy, Poland, Spain and Turkey)
- school curricula should be altered to enable an interclass videoconference once a month

PART IV

Cooperation (possible projects to follow)

- create a database with universal VC lesson scenarios to help SEN students (available through a web site), refer to Athena web site,
- support British schools with newly arrived Polish, Spanish, Turkish and Italian students (using VC),
- provide support for British schools for FL learning (eg. Spanish),
- carry out theme projects in various subjects (e.g. maths, science, environment, health technology, history) between schools to help specially gifted students,
- carry out linguistic projects to promote mobility and teacher in-service training (eg. basic courses in Polish/Turkish, Italian/Turkish and vocational training)

PART V

The participants agreed that local educational authorities should be informed about the potential of using VC. It was also agreed that the best solution would be to start using VC projects in smaller projects, e.g. through Socrates LLP projects or e-Twinning mini projects rather than on national or regional scale. During the conference the participants created a database of contacts for schools willing to partake in LLP projects using VC. It was also agreed that meetings with teachers should be held in the participating schools to promote the idea of videoconferencing.

PART VI

The participants agreed that still, there is a number of questions to be answered as far as VC for education is concerned. The most important of them are:

- should students cognitive and learning styles be analysed prior to implementing VC in teaching?
- how should evaluation tools be standardised to assess the efficiency of using VC in teaching.
- should VC be more a remedial or a supportive tool?

FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Video conferences open new possibilities for education and can be used both as a teaching and remedial tool. Videoconferencing is a culture and language independent aid to be used in schools across Europe on all levels of education – primary, secondary and tertiary. Videoconferencing helps to extend educational context (links with art galleries, universities, distant countries - Africa). Video conferences and new technologies are a challenge for teachers and educators and must not be treated superficially and without adequate knowledge.

Implementing new technologies (interactive boards, digital video cameras, supervised databases) is a must for modern education to support mobility, quality of education and intercultural dialogue in migrating Europe. More sessions, conferences and meetings must be organised to direct European education towards new communication channels and media.