

Closing the distance in Distance Learning.

Distance Learning is one of those concepts that seems to mean different things to different people. At its most basic level, Distance Learning is no more than learning about something without moving out of your office or home. Someone, somewhere, sends you materials by post and you're expected to wade through it and tackle the various assignments. You might have access to a tutor or adviser but, there again, you might not.

In today's hi-tech, computerised world, emails and the internet have taken the place of the postman so, at the very least, you can expect to access your learning materials faster, whether they arrive by email or you access them through an internet site. You're also likely to find out, maybe by return email, that you've failed your assignment, giving you plenty of time to have another go before the deadline expires.

The problems with Distance Learning can be varied, from the frustration of defining what it actually is, to the challenges of grasping new concepts, being tested on your knowledge, scoring reasonable marks and passing any final exams. It's not easy.

For passive learners, paper-based or online text and graphics may be all that's needed to stimulate learning and lead to a successful exam result. But for those of us who are active learners it can be more difficult because we tend to need a lot more stimulation. We hate the feeling of being alone and not having human contact. We learn better by listening to lecturers, engaging with tutors and interacting with subject experts. Without this added stimulation, we end up having to read everything half-a-dozen times just to grasp the basics and we still seem to fail all the tests.

And it's not just about Distance Learning. Events can be exactly the same. That's why we all file into all manner of seminars and conferences - so we can see someone and hear someone saying something and have an opportunity to ask questions, challenge the points we don't agree with or ask for clarification when we don't understand something. We go to see and hear and participate rather than passively reading the speakers' transcripts from an event we couldn't attend. Does this ring a bell or am I just sounding grumpy today?

Take the "event element" out of seminars, conferences and lectures and we take the dynamic elements out of learning, leaving us with what's left - paperwork and a few graphics. Surely there's more to it than this? I don't really mind learning from a distance but when that distance interferes with my ability to learn, I have a problem. The good news is that it's a problem easily overcome.

Gone are the days when there were major bandwidth, technology and cost restrictions. Now that we've entered 2008, we have all the bandwidth we need, costs are down, savings are immense and we now have the opportunity to develop Distance Learning content that's creative, engaging and more effective. The passive learners can now experience a new dimension to their learning and the active learners can have more than one of their senses stimulated at a time.

Think E-lectures

In the past, the problem with anything beginning with "E" was that it usually meant having a Masters Degree in Computer Science to cope with it. Not anymore.

Now "E" can be seen as Easy, as in easy-to-access and easy-to-use. Take E-lectures as just one example.

We now have the ability to create highly interactive lectures and presentations and web-cast them over the internet without the need for any in-depth computer skills. Basic computer literacy is all that's required. In the past few years, systems such as **e**lectern have been developed to allow lecturers, subject experts and other speakers to deliver interactive presentations or interviews, either live or from recorded archive material.

Presentations like these no longer have to be grainy images of talking heads in tiny areas of a computer screen. They can now be high quality, fully interactive web-casts with a range of enhancing elements, including:

- **High quality video**
- **High quality audio**
- **PowerPoint slide presentations**
- **Interactive text systems**
- **Multiple choice questionnaires**
- **Viewer polling systems**
- **User audit trails**

There may never be a substitute for face-to-face presentations but interactive web-casting offers many benefits.

Here are just a few to start with:

Convenience:

With only a computer and a broadband connection, students, or any other viewers, can access a live presentation or link to a recorded presentation at any time that's convenient to them.

Interactivity:

Viewers can ask questions during a live presentation without interrupting the flow of the presentation. The presenter can choose to answer a question immediately or at any time during the presentation.

Questions and polling:

Multiple choice questions or polling motions can be posed by the presenter and the system will display the outcomes within a few seconds.

Audit Trails:

All web-cast information can be logged, which will generate an Audit Trail showing:

- **Who has logged on**
- **Which presentations they have watched**
- **Which questions or polling motions they have responded to**
- **Scores achieved or polling outcomes**
- **Duration of viewing**
- **Support material (slides, etc) viewed**

To view even more benefits, see **BENEFITS OF eLectern WEB-CASTING.**

The benefits of E-Lectern Web-casting

For Organisations

- Easy to use – only need basic computer skills
- Easily integrated into a Virtual Learning Environment (eg Moodle)
- Very secure and extremely cost-efficient
- Create more flexible, high impact means of communications and learning
- Control who accesses each web-cast
- Reduce time away from base for meetings and presentations.
- Reduce the stress of travel and being away from home.
- Reduce travel, lost productivity and associated costs.
- Reduce impact on the environment

For Learners

- Access to learning anytime and anywhere
- Very easy to access and to use
- Faster and more effective learning model
- Removes feeling of isolation through the use of interactive texting and online collaboration.
- Ability to proceed at own pace.
- Easily verifiable as part of a CPD programme
- If you can access a web browser you can access eLectern.
- Reduce the need for travel and associated costs
- Reduce travel and study stress
- Reduce impact on the environment

Creating, and streaming a presentation.

Creating a web-cast presentation or lecture and streaming it on the internet is easy. It has to be easy because, if it weren't, people wouldn't want to do it.

Our choice of application is eLectern, which couldn't be simpler and has the added benefit of having been tested by major private and public sector organisations in the UK.

The Viewer's Perspective

First of all let's look at it from the viewer's perspective.

Below is a typical example of what the viewer would see when they log into an eLectern presentation.



(Presentation courtesy of NHS Education Scotland).

The viewer can hear and see the presenter in the screen at the top left and can see the presenter's PowerPoint slides in the large screen on the right. The viewer can also switch these screens around throughout the presentation, allowing them to position the presenter in the large screen and the PowerPoint slides in the small one.

Switching from one to the other only takes a mouse-click.

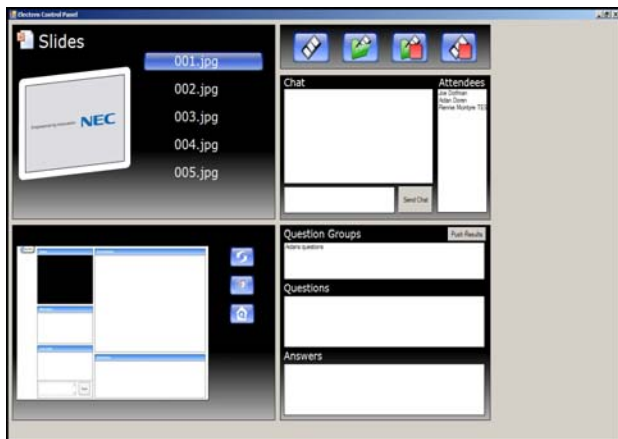
In the above example, just below the video screen, is an interactive text box that allows the viewer to ask questions or make comment on any aspect of the presentation.

Web-casts can be delivered live or from an archive and, with the **e**lectern system, all live web-casts are automatically archived unless instructed to do otherwise.

How easy can it get?

The Presenter's Perspective

Presenters have a choice of tools when creating their web-casts. For example, below is an illustration of the **Control Panel** used for web-casting live events.

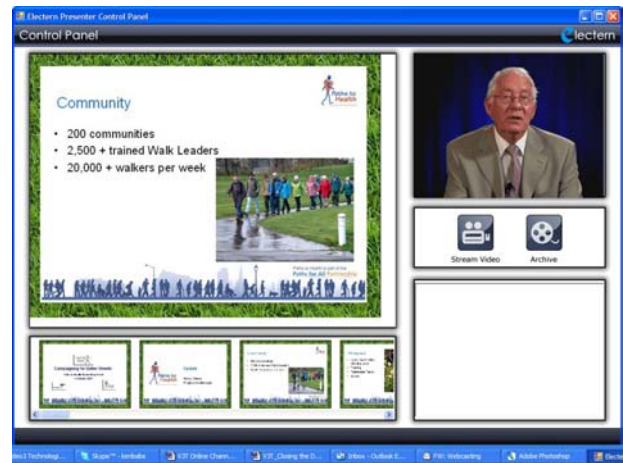


With this simple one page application the presenter can control the following commands:

- **Start video stream**
 - **Start archive**
 - **Stop archive**
 - **Stop video stream**
 - **Select and change slides**
 - **Move video into large window (and back again to small window)**
 - **Display questions and polling motions**
- Respond to questions, live from viewers.**

Another Presenter's Perspective

If a presenter simply wishes to deliver a talk, this can easily be achieved through the use of the **Presenter's Panel**, which is shown below.



With this panel the presenter simply begins the web-cast with a single button click and stops it again with another click. Slides are advanced by simply clicking on the space bar. The whole process could not be simpler.

What does it all mean for Distance Learning?

Web-casting for Distance Learning is being used by more and more organisations as they begin to appreciate just how cost-efficient it is to deliver effective learning, training and Continuing Professional Development. It provides greater impact and gives viewers a real opportunity to participate in interactive presentations.

But web-casting via the **e**lectern system isn't just high impact simplicity, it's also very cost-efficient. Even before fuel costs reached £1 per litre, huge savings could be made by organisations involved in Distance Learning or in the management of events such as seminars and conferences. On the simple side of budgeting, think of the costs of travel, accommodation, subsistence and lost production time when people have to attend events or short training courses. Multiply these costs across your staff and across an average year and the amounts can be staggering and makes it easy to make a sound business case for the adoption of Interactive Web-casting. And this doesn't even take the environmental impacts into account.

And finally...

The potential of Distance Learning can often be limited simply because some trainers and academics don't like using new technologies. Add to that the tendency for so-called IT experts to throw a spanner into anything they didn't think of themselves and you can start to see a disaster lurking.

Web-casting for Distance Learning should certainly involve the training and education personnel who have a role to play in content development and presentation. The IT experts should also be closely involved since they're the ones who can make things easier for everyone involved.

But... and here's the real challenge, the decision to develop web-casting services has to be a management decision.

The trainers and academics can obviously help and so too can IT and the finance department but let's not lose sight of the fact that web-casting is about serving customers who are usually well aware of what works for them when it comes to motivation, stimulation and the impact of interactive presentations on their learning.

One question might be, "Are we focussing too much on the lifelong learning of learners and not enough on the lifelong learning of our Distance Learning service providers and support staff?" Well, that's something we might discuss in a later article.

But, for now, why not...

We have been asked on numerous occasions to create non-technical information regarding the use of web-casting, distance learning and on-line collaboration. Therefore, please find attached a copy of "Closing the Distance in Distance Learning", the first in a series of our information bulletins.

We hope that you will find these both useful and informative. We plan to produce a series of these bulletins addressing such topics as...

- Event web-casting – key points worth considering when planning a web-conference
- The Presenter's guide to web-casting
- On-line collaboration – how to maintain the momentum after the delegates have left the conference
- Technology for faint hearted – why technology is simply the means to the end and why we must focus only on the benefits it can deliver

We hope these topics will be of significant interest to you and if you would like to subscribe to our monthly information bulletins, please visit our website at http://www.euroteknetworking.com/component/option,com_mosforms/Itemid,52/

Any comments or observations would be greatly appreciated.

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