

Appalachian State University Case Study

Increasing the Productivity of Distributed Teams with Teleplace

The Instructional Technology Computers (ITC) program at Appalachian State University provides graduate-level coursework in how to use computers to help students learn. All of the program's classes are distance-based and taught off campus to 160 students, who are almost all practicing education professionals studying part-time. ITC has been using a virtual worlds environment to deliver classes for about seven years. In mid-2007 the program's faculty began evaluating newer virtual worlds technologies in hopes of finding a solution with more advanced collaboration features to replace the software they were currently using. During the investigation process, they evaluated and selected Teleplace.

After members of the ITC team initially identified Teleplace, they arranged to see a demonstration, which was scheduled to take place during the program's advisory committee meeting. "Everyone was amazed when they saw the demonstration of Teleplace and what it could do," said Dick Riedl, professor of education, at Appalachian State. "The collaboration capabilities within Teleplace were so much more advanced than the virtual worlds technology we were currently using. That's one of the main things that attracted us to Teleplace – it was pushing the envelope in the exact direction that we wanted to go."

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The ITC team was impressed with the ability of Teleplace to enable users to work interactively on documents, while easily communicating with each other. They also liked how easy it was to create objects in other programs and import them into Teleplace workspaces. "We love the way Teleplace allows people to get online and interact easily by chatting or by using its excellent spatial VoIP capabilities," said Riedl. "And, with Teleplace, it is so easy to get documents into workspaces by just dragging and dropping. Other environments aren't that easy or they don't even provide that type of capability. To build objects in Teleplace, all you have to do is create a model or something else easily in Google SketchUp or another 3D program and then just drag and drop it into a workspace."



Holding Distributed Team Meetings in Teleplace

The ITC team is a distributed group that has two members who each live more than two hours away from campus. “One of the most frequent ways our faculty members interact is by meeting in Teleplace,” said Riedl, who has been holding the program team meetings in Teleplace since fall 2007. “The interactive capabilities in Teleplace have been extremely helpful: full duplex audio works really well, but we also have people who like to text chat more, so there are usually multi-layered conversations going on where some people are texting and some are talking.” The team met in Teleplace when it came time to schedule classes for the semester. “We put up a document in Teleplace and tried out different variations of who was going to teach which classes, to see what would work,” Riedl described. “Everybody could see what everybody else was doing. For example, if my colleague, John, said, ‘what if we moved this?’ Boom, it got moved there, and we all saw it and said, ‘No, let’s not,’ and then we would try something else until we had agreed on a final schedule.”

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If members of the ITC team need to hold informal meetings, they typically use Teleplace. “Holding a meeting in Teleplace is no big deal,” Riedl continued. “There’s actually a place called Dick’s Office, and someone usually says ‘are we going to meet in Dick’s Office?’ and we say ‘Yeah, let’s meet there.’ In fact, I’m having an annual report meeting with one of our faculty in Teleplace this afternoon rather than having her drive up here.”

The team also uses Teleplace to work on papers together. “We’ll meet in Teleplace to look at the paper and comment, or even just leave a version of the paper up there so someone can come in and edit it and then the next person can come and see what changes were made,” said Riedl.

Teleplace helped ITC streamline the hiring process when it was looking for a new faculty member. According to Riedl, “because of the distance, it was cumbersome to get everybody together. Instead, we met in Teleplace to look at resumes and work samples, and decide who to contact, which references to call, and who was going to call them.”

From now on, the group will hold its advisory committee meetings in Teleplace, instead of having everybody drive from all over the state. And, Riedl will be teaching a doctoral class, called Technology and Educational Organizations, in Teleplace this summer, which will be attended by students from all over the state?

The ultimate vision for ITC’s Teleplace environment, according to Riedl, is to have all users enter through a campus environment, which will allow them to interact with others “on campus” even though they might be in different classes or different parts of the program. ITC will use different types of workspaces for different uses. “An office might be what we set up to allow small groups to interact on projects and that type of thing. And, we always have shared presentations at

the end of a class, so we might use a gallery for that.”

Bringing Two Universities Together

Appalachian State and Clemson University formed the Carolina’s Virtual World Consortium in November 2007. To help fund the consortium, a team from both schools was formed and tasked with applying for grants. The grant writing team uses Teleplace to collaborate on the process. “At first we were using email, which was bouncing all over the place with a version of this and that,” said Riedl. “When we suggested to our colleagues at Clemson that we use Teleplace, their first response was reticence and most would say something like: ‘you’re going to make me install new software. Gosh, I don’t know.’ But once we got them into Teleplace, they said ‘wow’ and every time they found something new they could do, there was another ‘wow.’ And they pretty much fell in love with it.”

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Some people at Clemson had used Second Life and, as Riedl described, they said “‘I know how to use Second Life. Why don’t we just meet in there?’ And I had to say: because we can’t do what we need to in Second Life, it won’t let you work mutually on a document. You can see each other and do all sorts of other things in Second Life, but you can’t pull up something like a Microsoft Word document or a PowerPoint presentation and do a mutual edit on it. That’s the primary thing you can’t do in Second Life that you can do in Teleplace. It’s also a little harder to get privacy in Second Life.”

When the consortium’s third joint grant writing project came along, a team member from Appalachian State was the lead. She decided to introduce a new project planning format to help people think through what was needed to complete the grant. As the project began, representatives from both universities worked together in Teleplace moving things around on the project plan. The response from Clemson was “Teleplace is a really great tool,” said Riedl. The grant team, which was comprised of seven people, met four or five times online and, before each meeting, the team leader would prepare the Teleplace workspace by posting all the materials that were needed for the meeting, rather than sending everything out via email. “The team from Clemson was really impressed with the Teleplace technology and amazed at what it could do.”

Another capability of Teleplace that was a hit was that “everybody could put their picture and a badge on their avatar, which was especially helpful for people hadn’t met in person. One of the things we don’t like about Second Life is the anonymity of using an invented name and an invented avatar,” said Riedl.

The ability to see and hear where people are actually located in a workspace is another Teleplace feature Riedl said they value. “Seeing people moving around, knowing when someone is going over to look at something, and being able to say ‘oh, what are you looking at that over there?’ is extremely valuable. Also,

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being able to hear when the person on your right or left is speaking. It is much more than just voice recognition that we like. It is also that we can say ‘oh wait a minute, that must be Sean’s voice, because Sean is to my right and the voice is coming from the right and it sounds like Sean,’ then if we turn to face him we can see that he is talking. These are all unique and great features in Teleplace.”

Using Teleplace In K-12 Education Settings

The ITC program has also used Teleplace in projects that involved about 150 middle school students. “For the first one, we built a space station, had the students research a planet and create a brochure designed to get people to visit that planet, and then we put all the brochures into a gallery,” said Riedl. The second project got teachers involved too and focused on students that were studying explorers. “We gave each class its own Teleplace workspace and put students in teams of three. Each team’s job was to look at a different explorer and set up a virtual diorama that represented some specific and important things about the explorer that they were studying. Then, at the end of the project, all the kids from the different classes could go into Teleplace and look at all the different dioramas that other kids had built.”

A Successful Move to Teleplace

When asked how the ITC team feels about Teleplace, Riedl had this to say: “we like Teleplace a lot. Our goal when moving to a new virtual worlds technology was to gain better communication and collaboration capabilities, and improvements in the way we were able to share the results of our work -- Teleplace delivered on everything. Also, the team at Teleplace has been great to work with. They respond promptly if we have an issue or a question, and they were very receptive when we sent them a request for features we would like them to add.”

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