How One University is Using Video Conferencing in its Quest to Enhance Grade School Literacy

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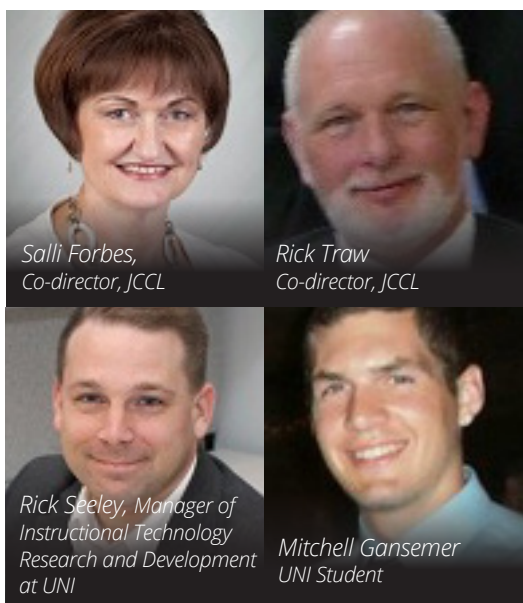
Summary

- University administrators, faculty and students must communicate over long distances in real time.

- Universities need easy-to-use, versatile and scalable collaboration tools.

- Faculty members don't just teach university students. They educate other teachers, work on educational programs that meet needs outside of the university system, write books, and conduct research.

- Students often collaborate in teams on projects for real companies.

University of Northern Iowa

Educational institutions play a major role in generating a new skilled workforce that has the potential to open the doors to innovations that will change the world. To achieve this, school administrators and educators must be able to communicate with each other and their students in real time.

The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) faces a challenge that is common to many schools offering distance education: students and educators are often situated far apart from one another. To promote interactive, rich communication, the university wanted to improve on previous solutions to allow for easier-to-use collaboration tools that do not require participants to travel to central meeting locations. Additionally, the tools needed to be versatile and scalable, with an uncomplicated video conferencing platform for faculty to engage with students and peers across distances.

Our story focuses on UNI's Jacobson Center for Comprehensive Literacy (JCCL), which works with schools and teachers to improve literacy of Iowa students. The center seeks to close the literacy achievement gap among diverse groups and increase literacy proficiency for all students by improving teachers' knowledge and instructional skills, and supporting these teachers in the long-run.

The JCCL oversees projects like the Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy and the Reading Recovery Center of Iowa, where literacy teacher-leaders and coaches are prepared in doctoral-level courses in a year-long preparation program. This program gives teacher-leaders and coaches the know-how they need to prepare literacy intervention teachers to bring students up to their grade's reading level and coach elementary school teachers to improve classroom instruction. While also taking preparation sessions at UNI, these teacher-leaders travel to schools across Iowa to work with teachers in elementary and middle schools.

The JCCL was looking for easy-to-use technologies that provide video conferencing capabilities to bring literacy coaches and the administrators together across long distances. They decided to use Zoom after seeing how well it fit with the organization's goals.

We spoke with Dr. Salli Forbes and Dr. Rick Traw, co-directors of JCCL, and Rick Seeley, manager of Instructional Technology Research and Development at UNI, about the organization's communication needs.

Dr. Forbes described the problem in more detail: "Administrators don't have the time to leave their schools frequently to come to meetings. For them, it's much better if they can meet over something like Zoom."

"We meet face-to-face with our coaches about three days a month, but then they go back to their schools to put the things we've done on campus into practice," said Dr. Traw. "There's a need for some discussion between those on-campus sessions. Recruiting next year's class also requires us to work with

administrators and principals around the state and discuss who they might send for leadership coaching at the JCCL."

Dr. Forbes also emphasizes that many of these people are working in distant, rural parts of the state and don't always have the ability to meet face-to-face on campus. A video conferencing platform was key to the success of the JCCL's collaboration with schools in different Iowa districts.

Before reaching a decision on Zoom, the organization tried other solutions. One of them, says Dr. Forbes, was "clunky" and better suited to one-way communication. She also mentioned that there were multiple instances where echoes disrupted the conversations. Consequently, participants in meetings had to wear earbuds or headphones.

A different solution they tried required every participant to have an account with the developer's company, an inconvenience that frequently affects people using video conferencing platforms.

Another common issue with other video conferencing solutions is network traversal to establish connections. Zoom has an incredible ability to get through networks because it uses common ports often open for other web applications such as SSL port 443. This allows Zoom to work on demand where other products do not.

The university deployed Zoom on-site in an ESXi server to manage its video conferences. Rick Seeley relates his experience of implementing the Zoom Meeting Connector, which allows organizations to run Zoom meetings on their own private servers: "I**t took 15 minutes; however, if I hadn't taken a phone call during the setup, it would have taken about 10 minutes**."

He was particularly excited about Zoom's Room Connector, which supports H.323 devices deployed in room systems from other video conferencing vendors. "I can't wait to see what the Room Connector is going to do for us; Zoom with H.323 interoperability will be a huge benefit for UNI," he said.

Seeley further stated, "**Another great benefit of Zoom.us is that it can be easily used across various mobile devices** like iOS and Android, as well as the traditional desktop and laptop platforms supporting Mac and Windows operating systems. This expands the potential utility to us that this tool can provide."

Zoom gave the JCCL three key benefits:

- An easy-to-use platform
- A way to communicate with people without unnecessary hassles or travel
- A collaborative environment in which organizations could function without forcing people into face-to-face meetings
- By adopting Zoom, the JCCL became:
- More flexible with meetings and schedules (particularly due to Zoom's mobile accessibility)
- More capable of catering to literacy coaches who were based in distant parts of the state

The JCCL faculty and staff aren't the only ones at UNI excited about Zoom. A senior student of Management Information Systems at the university, Mitchell Gansemer, has been using Zoom to collaborate with fellow students and other stakeholders on projects. "In our field, we do a lot of consulting. We're doing a live project development class where we meet with customers and make websites for them," he said. "We meet with the customer, determine their needs, and gather all of the information to come up with a plan that shows them what we can do. We have horrible winters in Iowa and we've been running close to a couple of deadlines. During those times, we happened to have snowstorms. It was vital to our projects to use a solution like Zoom."

It is important to note that Gansemer tried a number of different collaboration tools and picked Zoom above the rest in part because participants on the receiving end of the conference invitations did not have to have Zoom accounts to join a meeting. Gansemer also emphasized Zoom's ease of use and crisp "Another thing I like is that we combined Zoom with Google Docs. We have to write plenty of systems requests, memos of understanding, and essential documents, where one person writes while others give live feedback. So, we would pull up Google Docs in one screen while we communicated through Zoom on another," he said.

Zoom has not only enhanced the work of UNI's faculty and students in the present, it has become a key component of the university's future. Drs. Forbes and Traw state that **Zoom is the collaboration tool for the future of the JCCL.** They have begun to work with other university professors and colleagues in universities across the US to collaborate on editing a book, developing and conducting research, professional development for themselves and their coaches, and planning their work. They plan to use Zoom to expand this work with more educators outside of Iowa. The JCCL's literacy programs and student projects like Mitchell's are made simpler and more effective by Zoom's continued innovations in video conferencing. All it took was the ability to meet on a screen.