

The beauty of distance learning is the flexibility of studying at a convenient time and a location of choice - often juggling study time with a full or part time career. This arrangement also, however, creates the problem of maintaining communication with fellow students and teaching staff.

The University of Wales in Aberystwyth wanted to find a better way of working when it setup a distance learning course for undergraduates. The course, a BSc in Information and Library Studies, developed by the Department of Information and Library Studies, began in 1994 and now has over 250 distance learners.

It soon became apparent that a college information and communications system accessible by students from wherever they are based was urgently required. Most importantly, it needed to be user-friendly so students would use it regularly and get the most from the course.

John Nelson, of the Open Learning Unit at the university, had come across a number of different software packages that could create a conference style environment online when he attended a training course. The training had included Lotus Notes, Cosy and Caucus but he wanted something more user-friendly for his students. He was introduced to FirstClass Collaborative Classroom (FCCC) from SoftArc.

"I looked at all the options, but some software involved 14 floppy disks and was too complicated to use. This is just out of the question with the volume of staff and students involved at the university. The software had to be straightforward, otherwise staff and students would simply not use it."

FirstClass Collaborative Classroom, a system designed specifically for educational purposes, was selected. Its popularity is growing as it is easy to set up, simple to use and works across Apple and PC systems. It also does not require powerful hardware which is ideal for the broad range of equipment used by staff

and students. It includes messaging areas, a Web search engine as well as e-mail, Intranet, online chat and conferencing facilities. Students can access course module and option information without having to contact the college during working hours. Teachers can also control sub-conferences and limit Web access as required.

The college set up a conferencing system with the software, which it called 'Gwylan', the Welsh for seagull. When users log in they hear the sound of Aberystwyth seagulls, encouraging the feeling of belonging to a learning community.



There are also a number of benefits for the college using the FirstClass system. It facilitates a means of supporting learners through their course and offers a channel for self-help. It also provides a route to delivery of team-based distance learning with instructor participation, which is not possible through traditional computer training or e-mail-only products. It establishes a sense of community for the students and a way of keeping in touch with each other at any time of the day or night - vital for distance learners.

The benefits for the university have also been felt in the course administration. Tutors and administrators can now communicate with students via electronic means, although regular communications are also distributed in the post.

"Distance learning students' e-mail addresses change frequently as they move from one ISP to another, so it has been a real bonus to have



them accessible from one system. Messages can be picked up from any computer by logging on, and information is passed between the university and students easily," explained John Nelson.

Following the success of conferencing on the BSc program, the system is being integrated into Masters level courses. Health Information Masters students have particularly welcomed this technology as a Web browser is the only software needed to access the site. Furthermore, as it is strictly forbidden to load third party software onto NHS owned computers, this has been an ideal system.



other countries are less likely to pick up the phone and call a tutor for help, so electronic communication has strengthened the links. It has also cut down costs for the college in phone calls, postage and administration.

"Feedback to the Open Learning Unit from students confirms that this facility has been very well received. In fact, we have now made it a criterion for new students to have access to the technology. Any computer connected to the Internet provides access, which is convenient for most people. The news of our distance learning courses has also spread to other parts of the university and the Open Learning Unit is now advising the rest of the university on distance learning schemes," said John Nelson.

The university recently took the software a stage further and introduced FirstClass Rapid Application Development to the computer set-up. It has enabled the university to manage the student program more efficiently. The software collates student information in a database. Because distance learning has to be very flexible, each student has his or her own personal timetable and course account. When course work is submitted or a payment is made, the database system notifies the student that it has been received and automatically updates their account. The student and college are much better informed and organized as a result.

Distance learning at the university is adopted in its truest form. Students as far flung as Africa, Canada, Greenland, and increasingly Ireland are registered at the university. These students in particular are getting much more out of the course with the new set-up. Pupils living in