

How is the FirstClass Computer Conferencing System used in the Curriculum by Faculty at UMaine? (...and what are the challenges?)

- **Faculty-to-student communication**

Improves communication between faculty & their students. Some students find faculty more approachable by email; students can voice questions/concerns as they occur, even in the middle of the night. Faculty can contact students more easily via email than by telephone, or perhaps waiting until the next class meeting. Communication is asynchronous, matching faculty and students' respective schedules. *(Potential for lots of email, or email in situations that are better handled in person.)*

- **Student-to-student communication**

Students may "meet" one another more quickly within FirstClass than in the classroom, especially in large lecture courses. They ask questions of each other & help each other outside of the classroom by interacting through FirstClass. Especially helpful for the commuter student, who can participate in the electronic conversations much more readily than the person-to-person conversations.

- **Online office hours (chatting)**

The faculty member can make her/himself available at particular times of the day (or night) for online questions, perhaps in a class chat. Faculty member doesn't need to be on campus or even on the continent...and neither do the students! *(Rules for online chatting with groups must be established by the participants; can be confusing. Should offer some traditional office hours for those without or with limited access?)*

- **Distribution of assignments, lecture notes (attachments)**

Distribution can occur at the last minute, no more photocopier breakdown worries! Documents are easily updated. Students can retrieve as many copies of the assignment or syllabus as they need, when they need it, all semester--no need to track down the instructor for an extra copy. Online copies may serve as resources only, and may never be printed. Unused copies are not wasted; students can print a copy if they want/need it. In some cases, copying & use of paper is reduced. *(Why should students come to class? Faculty must address this issue with students. Multiple file formats must be addressed.)*

- **Collecting assignments, responses (attachments & messaging)**

Easy for students to make deadlines at the last minute. Students who truly can't be on campus for the due date of an assignment are not penalized--they have the same deadline. *(Faculty find these difficult to evaluate on the screen, puts responsibility on faculty to print if necessary. Multiple file formats are an issue.)*

- **Group collaborative projects**

Groups can have private conferences (with or without faculty) to deal with group dynamics, as well as the task at hand. Provides a semester-long record of dialog, interaction, and work submitted. Groups can accomplish much more work "offline," in the conferences, than they do by meeting in person. *(Each member of the group must have access.)*

- **Journals**

Students can submit daily or weekly journals in the form of a FirstClass message to a conference which may be either public or private. Faculty member knows that students are up-to-date; students are more likely to keep up with their journal entries. Faculty can stay on top of journal entries on a daily or weekly basis, too, and provide feedback as necessary. No journal notebooks to collect & read all at once, students can continue to contribute to their journals even as grading is going on. *(Can result in a lot of reading!)*

- **Discussion topics**

Faculty or students can start a discussion topic, and responses are threaded for easy reading. Several conferences could be created to enclose particularly busy threads. Participation on the part of students is *fairly* easy to judge. Because of its asynchrony, the responses & comments can be carefully phrased, well thought out.

- **Questions & answers**

Questions can be posted by faculty (to encourage dialog) or by students. Answers posted by faculty or students so that everyone in the course can benefit from the question and the answer. Students are often able to answer the questions of their classmates before the faculty member is aware that the question has been asked. Faculty can moderate the conference and add to a question when needed.