

Mentoring at a distance: my personal experience

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Since early November 2013 I have been mentoring a young hygienist from Mongolia. We have been meeting once or twice a week through Skype Video. In real time I can demonstrate various pieces of sampling equipment and techniques such as pump calibration, setting up sampling trains and using direct reading instruments. Augmented by slides and notes from a practical course that our company provides, this complements the course materials provided by her professor.

We are finding Skype Video a very useful teaching tool. We can switch back and forth between slides and live demonstrations at any time and I can respond to her questions as they arise and provide more information. We often follow up our sessions with emails.

Equipment: I use a small external webcam on a tripod rather than the one in my laptop computer because it is of better quality. I can also reach over and tilt the camera from my face to my table top as needed. Also, I use a second older computer to display my teaching slides to myself so that I can use my primary laptop to run Skype and check my own live action in front of the camera. I always wear a head set with good headphones and microphone in order to prevent feedback and background noises. Skype Video works best for a one-to-one call rather than for group calls but this makes it an ideal choice for mentoring.

Choosing the right location: Skype image quality is very important when you are teaching. I have experimented with various locations and lighting and I now have a live Skyping location and set-up that works well. Indirect lighting and a light-coloured neutral background seem to give the best results.

On camera skills: Practice your “television skills” with a Skype partner who is willing to help you develop your on-camera technique. Wear plain colours and try to minimize your body and hand movements when you are on camera. I try to have everything I need within easy reach (water, notes, pen, demo equipment) before I begin so I don’t have to leave my station during the mentoring session. Remember to look at the camera frequently, and smile.

I am enjoying working with my mentee immensely. I would definitely encourage other hygienists to get involved in mentoring. As they say, we learn by teaching.
