The aim of the study was to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of using a Webb-conference system in distance education. The experiment described below was carried out during autumn 2004 during a methodology course in Vocational Teacher Education. Participants were five women and three men with a mean age of 41 years representing six different vocations. Geographically they were spread over the north part of Sweden but already knew each other from a previous course. All of them had computers at home and judged their own computer competence in the middle or lower part of a five-grade scale. Three had access to Internet with broadband while the other had ADSL or modem. Two technicians from the Department of Education supported both teachers and students. The students received a Webb camera and an Internet address where instructions could be found about the software: How to download and install and how to configure the computer to the Webb-conference. They were strongly encouraged to call the technicians if they had any problem. Two tests to investigate the technical function when all were connected were made and finally two seminars were held, each three hours long. The first seminar was a report about experiences gained during their practice time at a local Upper Secondary School while the second seminar was focused on course literature. During the first seminar the agenda was more open compared to the second where questions to comment were presented on the participants computer screens.

The teachers at the course and the supporting technicians gathered their information in the form of a participatory study while the students were interviewed about their assumptions and values. The technicians recorded both seminars.

The interviews of the students revealed that they were more than satisfied with the seminars, mainly due to the decreased need of time-consuming travel and related accommodation costs. They expressed their surprise about the high quality although all mentioned the sound problem with feedback. Another issue frequently mentioned was the increased computer competence they had gained while making the technical connections possible and the adjustment of their own computers. They also pointed out that they missed the discussions they have had earlier when they met in person.

The technicians emphasized the participant’s lack of computer competence. In many cases they had to give detailed instructions how to get the software and install it. Furthermore they pointed out the lack of knowledge about how to adjust the sound on the computer. For those with modems they had to make arrangements with local study centers. In two cases when problems arose due to computer viruses they recommended the students to bring the computers to a local computer support company.

The teachers realized that they had to apply a different role as seminar leaders during the Webb-conference than during physical meetings. They had to be more authoritative and give very clear directives concerning the speech order. Furthermore they sometimes missed information given by the students because of their new role where they have to pay attention to the technical issues. This situation also made it difficult to make summaries and to bring forward principal questions for discussions. They also remarked that they had realized the importance of expressions in order to effectively lead the seminars. Their conclusion was that Webb conferences were useful when it came to individual descriptions, summaries and analyses but they failed to create a discussion. According to them it was partly the lack of visible body language and face expression that prevented or hampered discussions to develop. The teachers speculated that if the Webb-conferences were more frequently used both the number of meetings in person could be reduced and maybe most important - the time spent during such meetings could increasingly be used for discussions and reflections.

As a final remark: To establish a Webb-conference today in distance education is time consuming and needs technical support. The Webb-conferences are useful when descriptions of issues and reporting of tasks are made as well as in severely structured literature seminars. It is not any solution to all pedagogical problems facing distance education but it very well might develop into a useful tool.