If you were to pause outside the door of classroom 322 on the third floor of Armstrong Hall at Mankato State University at 7:15 a.m., everything would seem normal. If you opened the door you would not see what you expected to see. Inside the room would be adjunct professor Dale Ericson, a handful of students, three television cameras, and 10 television monitors. Room 322 is the 2-way interactive classroom at Mankato State University.

Room 322 is one of eight such rooms in seven locations that makes up the Knowledge Interactive Distribution System (KIDS) network in south central Minnesota. The other seven rooms are located in five surrounding independent school districts (one each in Cleveland, Lake Crystal, Nicollet, St. Clair, and two in St. Peter), and the Mankato Technical College (MTC).

Interactive Televised Instruction in Minnesota

The first 2-way televised instruction project in Minnesota went on-line in 1980. In September of that year three districts in northern Minnesota started sharing teachers via 2-way interactive television. The period between 1980 and 1990 has been one of exceptional growth in the use of 2-way interactive television in Minnesota. During the 1990–91 school year, there are 36 projects in operation connecting 149 of Minnesota's 433 school districts. Most of these projects are linked to one or more post secondary institutions (community colleges, technical colleges, state universities, and branches of the University of Minnesota). These cooperative networks serve the educational needs of the people of Minnesota with kindergarten through post-secondary and community service programming.

Two-way interactive televised instruction is very well suited for the state. There are several reasons for this. First, Minnesota has vast expanses of sparsely populated, education hungry school districts. Modern technology has given a boost to education in these regions. It has helped to expand the courses offerings in places where a critical mass of students do not justify the money to pay a teacher to teach a course. Interactive television technology also enables small, isolated school districts to meet minimum state curriculum...
requirements as well as offer enrichment courses that would otherwise not be available. This sharing of instructors and curriculum also helps to improve communications between small districts and pave the way for other types of resource sharing. And finally, interactive television has introduced post-secondary education directly into the high school. Minnesota has a post-secondary option open to its high school students. This option allows high school students to take college classes free of charge. (The student has the option of taking classes, the district does not have the option: it must pay for the students tuition and books!) With 2-way interactive television student can take college level classes without leaving their own school building, traveling many miles, and disrupting the rest of their school day. Since the students do not leave the building for several hours, other classes with low enrollment may not have to be cancelled for lack of students.

Developmental History of the KIDS System

In early 1983, the State Board of Education requested funds from the legislature to stimulate the use of technology in schools. The board wanted to fund 10 model sites around the state and requested proposals for grants. The KIDS project was initiated in late 1983 when Mankato State University and 15 Mankato area independent school districts began to explore the possibility of forming an interactive television system. Dr. Frank Birmingham, Chair of the Library Media Education Department at MSU, headed a steering committee to request the grant. Ed Lethert, now of SECO, Inc. in Minneapolis, was hired as the consultant. His job was to study the technical feasibility of the system and to aid in its planning and designing. In early 1984 the State Board granted $125,000 to fund the 15 area schools. Unfortunately, even with this money, the project was so expensive that some of the schools were forced to drop out of the project. Five of the original 15 school districts formed the KIDS network in late 1984. Dr. Birmingham became its first director. He scaled down the project to reflect the smaller number of participants and amended the grant. The scaled down version of the project still received all of the $125,000. This money was used to link the two post secondary institutions to the five independent school districts. The individual school districts paid for their own dishes and equipment. Cleveland, Lake Crystal, Nicollet, and St. Clair each had to pay between $30,000 and $40,000 for their own microwave system and interactive classrooms. St. Peter paid $11,500 for special equipment around its microwave tower and $17,500 for two interactive classrooms. MSU and MTC paid $9,000 and $9,500 respectively for one interactive classroom each. The initial outlay to get the system up and running totaled $340,000.

A tuition system was instituted under which each receiving school pays a set fee to the originating school. At a certain class size the point is reached when it is cheaper for a district to hire a teacher than it is to pay to receive the class from another district.

The first classes were presented over the system in September 1985. There were a French I class and two sections of Spanish I. All three originated from St. Peter High School. During the 1990–91 school year KIDS is televising 15 classes a day originating from St. Peter (8), Lake Crystal (5), and Mankato State (1), and Nicollet (1).

Physical Facilities

From the beginning, complete 2-way audio and video interactivity was considered crucial to a successful program. This criterion continues to be paramount today. This consideration is designed into the system and all of the interactive classrooms.