



On the return trip from a recent visit to South Africa, Donald Rallis missed a connecting flight to Washington, D.C., yet still managed to teach his classes - from a hotel room at London's Heathrow Airport.

On picture: Donald Rallis in South Africa

The associate professor of geography is no stranger to distance learning. Previously, Rallis has taught classes from China, using [Skype](#), and Cambodia, with an Internet program called Dimdim.

While in the past Rallis experienced difficulties with the Internet connection abroad, he successfully taught classes during his most recent trip to South Africa, once again using Dimdim.

For his four fall 2010 classes, he made sure they all were studying Africa at the time of his departure.

"In regional geography, I think it gives an immediacy to the experience if I'm there," Rallis said. "It helps bring to life something that might not be as lively on the pages of a textbook."

Sarah Alvarez, a student in Rallis' geography of sub-Saharan Africa course, said Rallis' trip enabled students to gain perspective on their discussion, which included pre- and post-Apartheid South Africa in several classes.

Using PowerPoints, Rallis displayed pictures he took of South Africa, ranging from the gorgeous scenery to the squatter villages nearby.

“Not many students get to see their professor interact in the exact surroundings they're teaching about,” Alvarez said.

While many universities throughout Virginia now offer online-only or hybrid classes, Rallis thinks this trend will not affect UMW in the near future. UMW is frequently praised for its low student to faculty ratio of 15:1, which encourages comfortable classroom environments.

Rallis said that should other courses utilize online systems, it must enhance learning.

“If it's just a gimmick, there's no point in doing it,” Rallis said.

Currently at UMW, the Fredericksburg campus offers no fully online courses. However, the Stafford campus offers many degree and certificate courses in a completely online or “blended” format.

With Dimdim, Rallis' students can see a PowerPoint or other presentation, hear and see video of their professor, and participate in an online chat in case questions arise during the presentation. Rallis said one of the biggest challenges to online lectures was staying animated sitting alone in a room talking to a computer screen.

“It can be a little unnerving sometimes,” Rallis said. “I was very nervous for the first class, after that it got easier.”

Alvarez realized how the format may have been stressful for the professor and guest lecturers, which Rallis invited to speak to classes during his trip.

“Sometimes, the lectures felt a little one-sided because there weren't really visual cues from the audience indicating confusion or interest, so that may have been tough for the lecturers,” Alvarez said. “However, the chat feature was helpful in alleviating some of the stress of that.”

Rallis said the chat feature encouraged participation by students who may not feel comfortable asking questions in a face-to-face classroom environment.

“There was quite a lot more discussion online in some classes than there would have been in class,” Rallis said.

Rallis, a self-described “avid traveler,” hopes his students were able to benefit from his journeys, photos and guest speakers, understanding that the geography they study “isn’t just about some abstract place.”

*By Anne Elder*

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