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Using VoiceThread to Enhance Asynchronous Collaboration and Communication

Tool: VoiceThread

Product: VoiceThread

Company: VoiceThread – Website: <https://voicethread.com/>

VoiceThread is a cloud-based application that boasts of improving student engagement and online presence in asynchronous learning settings. Attributes of student engagement include communication and collaboration which are essential in creating an interactive and engaging learning environment. However, these attributes can be lacking in an asynchronous setting. Romero-Hall & Vicentini (2017) indicated that learners in online asynchronous environments may lose social benefits that come from a face-to-face class. Benefits lacking include immediate feedback, social interaction with the instructor and students, and the opportunity to receive instant learning support. Vonderwell (2003) argued that asynchronous communication can often limit the “richness of communication and impedes student learning;” (79) whereas, in a face-to-face class instructors and students can take cues from verbal and non-verbal interactions (Kebritchi, Lipscheutz, & Santiago, 2017). Additionally, the tools (i.e., discussion boards, chat rooms, etc.) in an asynchronous learning environment can oftentimes be linear, clunky and hard to navigate, which create barriers for learners. Barriers that can additionally hinder the sense of community that students need in an asynchronous learning environment (Romero-Hall & Vicentini 2017). VoiceThread’s philosophy is to change the learning interaction by allowing learners different modalities to share knowledge regardless of time and space. VoiceThread’s modalities go beyond text-based discussions in order to allow a different type of conversation in an asynchronous learning environment including text, video, and audio. According to Ward, Ward, Lester, & Tao (2019), Voicethread can serve as a “virtual community enabling learners to easily communicate,

get involved and engage,” thus, increasing collaboration. All are important attributes imperative to an asynchronous learning environment (Ward, Ward, Lester & Tao, 2019).

About VoiceThread: Tool Review

The VoiceThread platform is cloud-based and has two main functionalities: a) creating a VoiceThread and b) commenting within an existing VoiceThread. VoiceThread is free to anyone. However, to utilize the technology in a class, there are different pricing models based on the needs of the instructor and the institution. Instructor and site licenses are available for K-12 and Higher Education. The Instructor license includes one instructor and fifty student accounts at a cost of \$79 per year for K-12 and \$99 per year for higher education. Site licenses are based upon size of district and are contract based. For businesses, VoiceThread plans are available for an individual business license at \$20 per month, which includes an unlimited number of threads and comments, and are also available on a contract basis.

VoiceThread is considered a third-party tool and to comply with COPPA and FERPA laws, VoiceThread’s K-12 and Higher Ed licenses have been reviewed by iKeepSafe for compliance. iKeepSafe certifies digital products by ensuring that protected personal information is handled correctly. Additionally, VoiceThread is 508 – US Rehabilitation Act compliant. The platform is designed for screen readers, including the ability to add closed captions to media components and provide different modalities for users to comment. The different modalities for commenting offer an opportunity for students with learning disabilities to participate and engage with the content. According to VoiceThread, adopting universal design principals provides an infrastructure for the entire platform.

Creating a VoiceThread product consists of uploading media files or creating a webcam recording. Media files can be uploaded from any browser or mobile device and include images, MP3, MP4, and PowerPoint Slides. Other importing options include Google Drive, Khan

Academy, Flickr and the New York Public Library. After creating a VoiceThread recording, users can comment by using the text or audio only, phoning in a comment, uploading a pre-recorded file or recording a video using their webcam features. Another comment feature is the ability to annotate or “doodle” on the media. As in a regular online discussion, all comments are made and accessed asynchronously. VoiceThread has several sharing options (URL link, embedded code, etc.) and can be integrated into most learning management systems depending upon the type of license.

Two drawbacks with VoiceThread include its difficulty in navigating multiple VoiceThreads and the inability to export content without incurring extra cost. In the study by Ching and Hsu (2013), students likewise reported that discussions were somewhat disjointed because not all VoiceThread discussions were collected in one place. They found this especially problematic when trying to navigate to their peer’s presentation. Students had to go in and out of the VoiceThread links, thus, making it difficult to track their own comments. Exporting content could be an important feature for an instructor or student wanting to document the content from the VoiceThread. Having an extra cost to export, may hinder users from downloading their work. It is unclear if the extra cost for exporting applies to a site license. If exports are purchased, they must be downloaded within 90 days after the export purchase date. Despite the drawbacks, students in the Ching and Hsu (2013) study preferred VoiceThread’s audio and video feature more than text as it allowed students to “convey emotion, personality, and non-verbal cues better than text-based discussion” (312).

Instructional Uses for VoiceThread

VoiceThread can be leveraged in several ways for instruction. The most commonly used strategy is either instructor-led or student-led VoiceThread discussion. In the instructor-led discussion, the instructor creates the VoiceThread and students comment around the thread

using the different modalities available. Instructors can utilize VoiceThread's different media upload types to help craft dynamic content. For example, using VoiceThread, an instructor might choose to use the webcam feature to create a short video or use the image upload to showcase a slide show of concepts. The creation of student-led VoiceThreads, enable students to collaborate in generating content. This method empowers students in taking responsibility for their own learning and provides an authentic learning environment (Snowball & McKenna, 2016). As in the instructor use of VoiceThread's upload features, students can also upload a plethora of content to help create a presentation or a discussion prompt for conversation. Both strategies allow for peer-to-peer conversation that is strengthened by VoiceThread's functionality of a circular discussion enhancing communication and collaboration.

Instruction that uses VoiceThread for the student-led strategy has the potential to develop high-order thinking skills. An example of this strategy may include having students work in groups to create a presentation based on research findings. Using the VoiceThread features, students can upload or create content, organize the content, and then share the information with peers while, in the meantime, have a discussion around the content using VoiceThread's text, audio, or video comment features. This constructivist view of VoiceThread in instruction allows for students to collaborate in creating content using verbal and non-verbal cues, go beyond information given within a course, make decisions, and transform information.

Conclusion

As with any educational technology it is imperative that the technology does not become a barrier but, rather, enhances learning. Learning that occurs asynchronously online is even more susceptible to barriers and can suffer a loss of social interaction (Romero-Hall & Vicentini 2017). VoiceThread has the possibility to minimize barriers and promote social

interaction with its unique ability to allow for text, audio, and video modalities. Furthermore, VoiceThread has the capacity to enhance communication and collaboration along with promote high-level order thinking, provide rich feedback (Ward, Ward, Lester & Tao, 2019), and create a sense of community in asynchronous online courses.

The image is a screenshot of a web browser displaying a VoiceThread advertisement. The browser's address bar shows the URL <https://voicethread.com/products/highered/>. The main content area has a dark background with the text "VoiceThread fills the social presence gap found in online learning interactions" in white. Below this, there is a video player showing a hawk in flight and a person's face. To the right of the video player is a sidebar with several menu items: "What is VoiceThread?", "Interactive Video Commenting", "VT in a MOOC", "Commenting", and "Creating". An arrow points to the video player with the text "People add comments whenever they want, there's no scheduling". At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a quote: "VoiceThread offers a natural online interaction that lends itself to students presenting & defending their work before experts and peers." followed by "— Educause Learning Initiative".

(From <https://voicethread.com/products/highered/>)

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