



7 Things You Need to Know about VoiceThread

A white paper from Teaching and Learning with Technology
at Penn State

At a Glance:

- Tool for having conversations around media
- Considered a “group audio blog”
- User interface makes it easy for non-technical types to engage
- Offers free accounts for rapid access

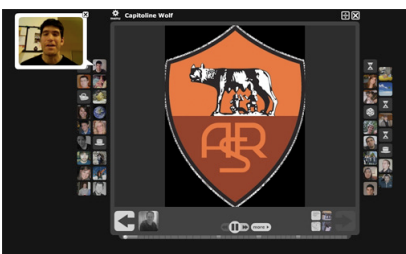
Who to Contact

Education Technology Services - Matt Meyer:
e-mail: mnm14@psu.edu

Potential Applications

Penn State Roman Archaeology Course

Dan Berman used VoiceThread for his online Roman archaeology class. He created instructional slides and then required students to add their own comments. For the remaining weeks of the course, he had teams of students produce their own VoiceThreads.



<http://voicethread.com/share/72853/>

Students quickly adapted to the tool and produced increasingly innovative VoiceThreads to turn in each week. He required students to comment on other teams' VoiceThreads as a way of promoting conversations about class topics.

1. What Is It?

VoiceThread is a Web-based application that allows users to create a shared presentation as a media album that visitors can asynchronously comment on either by text, voice, or video. The presentation can include any form of digital media, including images, audio, video, and text. The resulting output of this combination of the digital presentation and accumulated viewer comments is called a “VoiceThread.” Completed VoiceThreads can then be shared on the VoiceThread site or embedded into Web pages or blogs. They can also be exported for offline consumption running from a computer hard drive, a DVD, a video-enabled MP3 player, or a mobile phone. In sum, VoiceThread allows an entire group conversation to be collected from anywhere in the world and then shared for playback in one place. VoiceThread has been referred to as a “group audio blog” because, like a blog, it fosters comments on a topic but goes further by allowing these comments to be offered in audio format.

2. Who's Doing It?

Approximately 90% of VoiceThread's use is in the educational market. Its rapid adoption in education is due to the application's ease of use and the ability to enroll quickly and easily in free accounts. Because VoiceThread is a hosted solution, individual instructors are more willing to sign up for accounts and enroll their students for free.

In higher education, universities such as the University of North Carolina (UNC), Duke, and Gallaudet have made institutional commitments to using VoiceThread by integrating the application within their own technology infrastructures. At UNC, the staff responsible for the VoiceThread application have indicated an impressive growth in the number of VoiceThread accounts being activated since their official adoption of the technology. It has been so rapid, in fact, they have stopped actively promoting VoiceThread to faculty in fear of running over their current seat license limits.

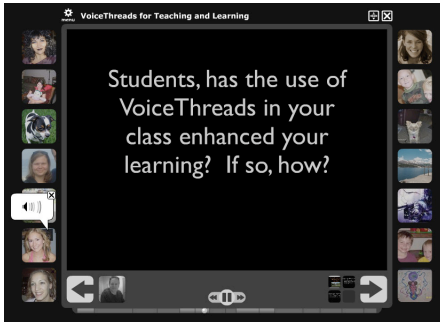
At Penn State this past spring, a course in Roman archaeology was successfully taught online using VoiceThread for student-created group projects with favorable ratings from the professor as well as the students.

3. How Does It Work?

After creating an account, which takes only a few seconds, an individual can begin creating a VoiceThread by uploading media elements (images, videos, text, audio) into slides to create a presentation. The creator can then add annotations that are either audio, video, or text on each slide. At this point, the VoiceThread creator can share the presentation with any group of individuals who, in turn, can quickly and easily add comments on any slide in one of five digital forms. Because VoiceThread is an asynchronous application, individuals can add to the digital conversation at any time they wish without worrying about being in the conversation “live.” VoiceThread even has a “phone commenting” feature for users (US only) who want to make audio comments but do not have the appropriate microphone or Web camera configuration on their computer. Users adding comments can also use the “doodle” function that allows a commenter to draw on the media slide while making a comment. The VoiceThread, once set up, can be shared automatically via a Web link that can either be automatically e-mailed or posted. It can also be embedded into an existing Web page or blog. For example, a VoiceThread can be posted to an individual's Facebook or MySpace page.

Instructor and Student VoiceThread: Reflections on the Experience

At Sierra College, Michelle Pacansky-Brock extensively used VoiceThread in her online classes in art history. She created a VoiceThread for various instructors and students who used the tool to reflect on how VoiceThread has enhanced their teaching and learning experience.



<http://bit.ly/HsMcy>

Related Sites

VoiceThread
<http://voicethread.com/>

Wiki for VoiceThread users
<http://voicethread4education.wikispaces.com/>

Information for planning a VoiceThread
<http://bit.ly/KCk4Y>

Wiki with links to ideas and samples
<http://bit.ly/lui5Z>

VoiceThread Research Team

Dan Berman
Cathy Holsing
Matt Meyer
Chris Stubbs
Kim Winck



This document is released under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States Licence

© 2009 The Pennsylvania State University

4. Why Is It Significant?

VoiceThread is carefully designed to be so user-friendly that instructors who would typically shy away from technology in the classroom are more likely to be interested in using it, regardless of their technical ability. Steve Muth, cofounder of VoiceThread, notes “for all of the talk of the web 2.0 tools and social interaction, the truth is that these tools have not penetrated beyond the surface level consisting of the ‘edtech elite.’ We really want to reach the other 95% who don’t use the web beyond email, or perhaps their LMS (Learning Management System) interfaces.”

For instructors, the learning curve for creating and setting up a VoiceThread is extremely short and for students, participation is simple and done at their leisure. Feedback from students is noticeably positive regarding VoiceThread experiences. Michelle Pacansky-Brock, an art history teacher at Sierra College, surveyed her college-level class after using VoiceThread and found that “70% of them strongly agreed or agreed that the use of VoiceThread contributed to establishing a sense of community in this class.” Students also responded strongly that hearing the instructor’s voice and seeing the instructor via Web cam comments made them feel the instructor was “actively present” in the learning experience.

5. What Are the Implications for Teaching and Learning?

The 2009 Horizon Report K-12 Edition states, “A growing emphasis on collaboration in education—and an increasing recognition that collaboration is the norm in many modern workplaces—has led more teachers to seek tools to facilitate group interaction and teamwork in their classes.” VoiceThread provides a unique tool for teachers to tap into this trend because it is easy to learn and it is enthusiastically embraced by students. Students express, besides the ease of use, their willingness to participate in VoiceThread discussions for several reasons, including a sense of confidence that they can contribute comments that are not off-the-cuff, but considered, and even practiced, before they go “live.”

VoiceThread’s impact was enough for the University of North Carolina to fully implement a custom VoiceThread portal for faculty and students, complete with a custom interface and integration with UNC’s single sign-on authentication system. Since its implementation, UNC VoiceThread administrators have noted that “everyone we’ve talked with plans to continue using VoiceThread once they’ve used it once.” The instructor of the Roman archaeology course at Penn State noted that VoiceThread “plays to the strengths of an online environment while minimizing the weaknesses.”

6. What Are the Downsides?

Because VoiceThread is so simple to use, it does lack some functionality that faculty might wish to see. For example, VoiceThread posts all comments sequentially with no ability to engage in threaded discussions. The ability to edit comments once they have been submitted is also not available. Though this ensures maximum accountability, when coupled with sequential comment posting it can also lead to incorrect information being perpetuated along an entire thread. Participatory assessment is somewhat difficult. Also, there is currently no way to view all of the activity of an individual user on a single page. Fortunately, VoiceThread recognizes these issues and plans to address them.

7. Where Is It Going?

VoiceThread intends to develop additional enhanced features but also to continue to maintain the simple user interface that makes it so popular. VoiceThread developers intend to add the following enhancements in the next year: Section 508 compliance for accessibility, multipage commenting (ability to navigate multiple pages of a thread while commenting, so that a user can compare/critique multiple ideas/media within a single comment), reporting tools for the management dashboard, an e-mail notification infrastructure, the ability to geotag content, the ability for a creator to reorder comments via drag and drop, improved search functionality, and developing a way for users to contact each other outside of a VoiceThread conversation. VoiceThread also expects to continue adding higher education clients, providing full custom integration such as has been implemented at UNC and Duke. Finally, VoiceThread will continue to add integration with third-party products such as iPod/iPhone and Moodle.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Penn State is committed to affirmative action, equal opportunity, and the diversity of its workforce.
U.Ed. ITS09-7043