



Using VoiceThread to Promote Active Learning and Learner Engagement in an Online Business Course

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Abstract

This position paper explored the use of a Web 2.0 technology, VoiceThread, to enhance student engagement and active learning in one business course. The platform was integrated into various learner-centered activities together with learner reflections, and relationships to key concepts of an online course as part of a course improvement plan. The researchers found that the use of VoiceThread provided the much-needed momentum by enabling a learning community and encouraging students to become more involved, thereby contributing to their success.

Introduction

Online instructors continuously explore, and share tools and techniques to integrate into their learning management systems (LMS) in order to enhance active learning and learner engagement. In fact, “fostering a culture of sharing within higher education is central to improving the challenges that faculty face in today’s rapidly accelerating technological instructional landscape” (Pacansky-Brock, 2013, para 9). One big challenge is identifying compatible technologies that support learning objectives and mirror active learning practices in face-to-face classes. Utilizing Web 2.0 technologies to encourage active learning and collaboration in an online class is an integral part of designing, improving and delivering courses. As noted by Negash and Powell (2015): “engaging students in an online course is a challenge. Students often report that online courses are death by discussion board” (p. 4). Moreover, complying with accreditation standards, and guiding principles of course improvement are as essential.

The bulk of research in the use of VoiceThread was found in K-12 literature (Negash & Powell, 2015; Hew & Cheung, 2013). However, in current years, there has been an increase in the use of Voice Thread in higher education (Voice Thread Research, 2016). One such study revealed that university undergraduates in an Introduction to Technology course used an array of digital tools, including VoiceThread: “The findings show that the undergraduates were generally able to use unfamiliar technologies easily in their learning to create useful artifacts” (Ng, 2012, p. 1065).

Methodology

The purpose of this preliminary study was to explore the experience of VoiceThread in promoting active learning and learner engagement in an online business course. The research question was: What types of experiences do students have with VoiceThread regarding active learning and learner engagement?

VoiceThread was used in the online business course entitled, Professional Development. The enrollment for fall 2016 was a total of 17 students, including 12 undergraduate and five graduate students. The two textbooks used for the course were: Emotional Intelligence 2.0 (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009) and What Motivates Me: Put Your Passion First (Gostick & Elton, 2014). The course description as it appeared in the course syllabus:

This course is about the study of various aspects of professional development and their importance to success in the business environment. Emphasis will be on developing an understanding of the role of motivation and emotional intelligence as you mold your career, interviewing and resumes, building your reputation with LinkedIn, and managing organizational and personal change. Learners will take two self-assessments, one on motivation (What motivates and inspires you?) and the other on Emotional Intelligence or EI- Can you read your own emotions as well as the emotions of others?

As part of a course improvement plan, first, the researchers sought to identify a compatible Web 2.0 technology with the goal of creating a learning community to support student engagement and active learning. The criteria used to determine one such platform, VoiceThread (iTunes Previews, VoiceThread LLC, 2016) were that VoiceThread: 1) supported the “course objectives and competencies to enhance learning” (Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric [QM], 2014, p. 25) as the tool offered a “multi-sensory interaction on learning in general” (VoiceThread Research, 2016, para.1) thereby responding to the definition of learning as a human adaptation process (Kolb, 1984); 2) helped build a virtual community where students felt they were part of; 3) offered learners a context “with an opportunity to reflect” (Siemens & Tittenberger, 2009, p. 9); and 4) was compatible with the standards of the QM Higher Education Rubric, and the National Survey of Student Engagement Indicators & High-Impact Practices (2016). Furthermore, VoiceThread had been integrated into the university’s official LMS, Blackboard (Blackboard, n.d.) for the much-needed technology support and required training for faculty and students. Once the course was developed, at the start of the semester, the instructor ensured that all students were trained in using VoiceThread.

The following questions were posed to determine the effective integration of VoiceThread into the course: What are examples of engaging and collaborative tools, and how can instructors utilize them to maximize learner opportunities to further develop their beliefs and mental models? What are some approaches that maximize collaboration and feedback opportunities, both between the instructor and learners and between the learners themselves?

Table 1
Course Activities Related to VoiceThread

Instructions for Activity 1	Select one of these topics listed below and place in VoiceThread. Relate one of these items to your work experience. Respond to one other classmate. I have posted my video to begin the use of this communication tool. Be sure you meet the Voice Thread rubric requirements. The rubrics are all found under “Start from here” on the left hand menu. The topic choices are as follows. 1) Define “job sculpting.” Have you sculpted or been sculpted? Tell us about your experience. 2) Does Jimmy Casas’ story have any meaning to you? 3) Does Steven Reiss’ story carry any meaning to you? 4) React: The motivations that drive us are the hinges upon which our lives swing, and it is only when we understand what makes each of us passionate about our work that we can begin to bring about a personal boom in our activity.
Instructions for Activity 2	Select one of the following and cite textbook (What Motivates Me: Put Your Passion First (Gostick & Elton, 2014) comments in your analysis: 1. What helps people feel engaged, enabled, and energized in their daily work? 2. What factors increase or decrease levels of job satisfaction? 3. What is it that makes people want to quit a job? 4. Respond: What motivates a labor-and-delivery nurse is vastly different from what motivates an emergency room nurse or an oncology nurse: “But we have been treating them all the same—they have all been ‘nurses’ to us” (Gostick & Elton, p. 27).
Instructions for Activity 3	Read Emotional Intelligence 2.0 (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009) Chapters 1-2 and take the Emotional Intelligence Appraisal. Select one of the items below and respond in VoiceThread. Respond to one other classmate. 1) Can you relate to Butch Connor’s story? Explain. 2) “It’s so easy to forget that we have emotional reactions to almost everything that happens in our lives whether we notice them or not” (Bradberry & Greaves, p.14). 3) React to the image on page 19. 4) React to the image on page 20.
Instructions for Activity 4	After you review the documents below, share your recent or past job search experience. What did you do well? What would you change? If this does not really apply to you, how do you intend to conduct your job search? Place our thoughts in VoiceThread and respond to one other classmate.
Instructions for Activity 5	Select one of the relationship management strategies. Where have you seen it applied? Comment on the event and reply to one other classmate.
Instructions for Activity 6	Tell us five ideas, concepts you feel you now have a greater understanding of. Or another way of putting it, what do you know now that you did not know before this course? Respond to one other classmate.

Discussion

In all activities, based on choice theory as proposed by Beresford and Sloper (2008), learners were given a choice as indicated in Table 1 with the following instructions: Select the topic from a list of alternative issues related to the course objectives tied to the reading. In addition, while initially encouraging the use of video, learners had a choice in response medium- video, audio or written text.

Moreover, learners were asked to reflect and relate the materials to their real-life experience. The method for student response was to respond to a classmate of their choice and then add their unique comments. In both courses, the last comment was to reflect on the entire course by means of using the following instructions: Tell us five ideas, concepts you feel you now have a greater understanding of. Or another way of putting it, what do you know now that you did not know before this course? Respond to one other classmate.

Students responded to a classmate of their choice, and the instructor also responded, individually and collectively. In all cases, by responding to one other classmate, students were encouraged to engage and reflect.

Instructor feedback was provided via a range of media individually and collectively. Audio podcasts, via Soundcloud were provided. Soundcloud is: “an audio platform that lets you listen to what you love and share the sounds you create” (Soundcloud Tumblr, n.d., para. 1) At times the link was stand alone and, at other times, feedback provided on a set of notes taken as the instructor listened to the VoiceThread comments of each learner. At times video feedback was provided with a link to a specific YouTube, or a link to a video created using Swivl, a tool that allows split screen, presenter one the left and slides on the right. Finally, occasionally feedback was in the form of a Pdf file of an article related to the overall topic.

Throughout the course the instructor was able to observe all the learners as the numbers of students in each course did not make up a large group. The instructor took daily notes regarding their collaboration and their interactions. In addition, as the course came to a conclusion, students provided the instructor with an evaluation of the course based on all three interactions: learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-instructor (QM Higher Education Rubric, 2014). Both informal interviews in the form of focus groups, and textual data provided the researchers were textually rich data (Creswell, 2012). The textual data were analyzed and codes were formed for themes.

Findings

Anecdotal data and qualitative analysis of student perspectives and evaluations based on learner engagement indicated that VoiceThread was instrumental in encouraging more interactions and support, resulting in creating a much needed virtual community. Students felt they “belonged” to a community, they could “trust” their classmates and “rely on them” when needed. Similar findings were noted by Fallon (2011): “...majority of students, using the classroom helped build trust and rapport and went some way toward developing a sense of identification with others in the group—three important components in relationship formation.”

The words and phrases used in describing student feedback and thoughts for the two courses were positive: “felt challenged,” “felt supportive,” “felt successful,” “felt organized,” “being helped,” “being encouraged,” and “felt needed.” Majority of the students indicated that the interactions with their classmates “helped” them “improve” their skills: “better team members,” “was able to help solve problems,” “able to listen to others.” In addition, reflections by means of video, text encouraged students to share their experiences and learn from the experiences of each other. Learning from each other was fundamental as the course taught professional training and prepared them for the workforce.

Furthermore, students revealed that being part of a learning community encouraged them to be “open” with other students and their instructors. Many revealed feeling related to support and friendly community. They were “not intimidated.” They did not feel “peer-pressure.” They felt that they “belonged” to a community and “enjoyed studying with others.” Forming a focus group of 21 volunteer students, when the instructor asked if students felt more supportive learning in a virtual community, majority of the students indicated that they definitely felt part of the group. These students were able to make comparisons as they had also been experienced in taking face to face classes. Some indicated that they found more support in their virtual groups than they did in their face to face classes. They were able to “communicate more” with their classmates.

This paper demonstrated that VoiceThread appeared to be extremely effective in delivering an online business education related course content to virtual learners. Qualitative data indicated that students not only felt engaged in active learning but also had a sense of “belonging” in a supportive online community.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated the ways in which VoiceThread could promote a dialog, and engagement between learner and instructor, learner and content, and learner and learner, creating a collaborative learning environment in the process resulting in active learning in a supportive environment. The researchers concluded that, because VoiceThread offered a range of appropriate learning activities and feedback tools, it proved to be an effective learning tool that met QM standards, creating a supportive environment, and encouraging more active learning.

Recommendations for Further Research

This position paper was limited in that it presented the use of VoiceThread in one online course as part of Business education curriculum. Future studies of Web 2.0 technologies in higher education online courses need to be conducted. The researchers suggest the following research topics to determine the efficacy of Web 2.0 technologies regarding active learning and virtual learning communities:

1. A statistically powerful longitudinal study with larger groups to determine the efficacy of Web 2.0 tools in supporting active learning.
2. An exploratory study on instructor feedback when using Web 2.0 technologies in online classes.
3. A correlational study to determine the relationship between VoiceThread and retention in learning communities.
4. An exploratory study on VoiceThread and Student Engagement using National Survey of Student Engagement Indicators.

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