The Emerging Learning Design Journal

Volume 3 | Issue 1 Article 3

February 2018

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Recommended Citation

Margolies, Beverly (2018) "How Voki Implementation Began at Bergen," *The Emerging Learning Design Journal*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/eldj/vol3/iss1/3

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eld.j

Volume 3 (2017) pp. 14-15
http://eldj.montclair.edu
ISSN 2474-8218

Emerging Learning Design Journal

Briefs

How Voki Implementation Began at Bergen

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November 2, 2016

ABSTRACT

This article describes how VOKI was discovered and implemented at Bergen Community College. Voki is a free multidisciplinary tool to create your own persona by designing a talking avatar to suit your needs. Voki offers customization options for selecting your image, background, and voice. Messages can be delivered in any of 30 languages. At Bergen, Voki has been used in online courses and embedded on numerous web pages. Prior to the May 2015 ELD Conference, Ms. Margolies presented on this topic in 2014 at the Bergen Community College's CITL Technology Showcase and the NJEdge Annual Conference.

Keywords: avatar, Voki, connecting with students

When I discovered Voki five years ago, I was intrigued by the concept of a talking avatar. Upon exploring the Voki.com website, I discovered an easy, free, and innovative tool to build your own persona. Voki allows you to take on the identity of an animated character, animal, alien, or person and use that avatar to deliver your message.

After choosing your character, you can tweak the skin, eye, and hair color. Each character can be dressed up by selecting clothes, and adding accessories: hats, sunglasses, jewelry, or other props. The outfit you select, although only visible from the shoulders up, can provide a more formal or informal attire. Additionally, you can set the background scene: classroom, lecture hall, indoors, outdoors, day, night, city, country, NY, Paris, snowy mountain, sandy beach, or just a plain green screen.

Voki excels in its variety of voice options. The avatar becomes animated while speaking. Add a sixty second message by recording your own voice or use the keyboard for text-to-speech technology. With text-to-speech you can select the voice, language, and accent. Voki is multilingual and supports thirty foreign languages. Once complete simply click the Publish button to generate the URL link or embed code.

I was looking for an opportunity to implement Voki in the online classroom. At that time, I was meeting with several Professors each week in my role as an Instructional Designer. A psychology professor expressed concern that students were not reading important messages she was posting in Moodle, our online course management system. Critical messages were getting lost in a sea of text, the scroll of death pasted on her Moodle wall. I suggested that she deliver her most important messages via Voki. After creating her Voki and adding her message, we embedded the Voki player onto her course wall. Voki catches the students' attention and curiosity. Students are intrigued when they see this colorful avatar with a play button. They can't help but press play to hear the message. The professor's motivational messages and reminders of upcoming exams were now being heard.

An Education professor, who was new to technology, met with me weekly since it was her first time teaching online. She wanted an innovative tool to entice her "Intro to Teaching" students to be more active in course activities. I suggested she assign an extra credit for students to use Voki to practice their first-day-of-school speech. There were several students who created well thought-out, impressive Vokis. I included an excerpt of one in my demonstration video: http://tinyurl.com/voki-animate .

In my next role as Web Developer, I worked with Nadine Phillips, BCC's Online Counselor, to develop and setup the Student Affairs Online (SAO) orientation

eld.j
Volume 3 (2017) pp. 14-15
http://eldj.montclair.edu
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site. Initially the VP of Student Affairs wanted to embed introductory videos with closed captioning for each online department webpage; accessibility being a critical component. With twelve departments, the complexity of scheduling videotaping sessions, performance issues, and the imminent deadline to release the site became overwhelming. Given the tight timetable, we needed a voice-over tool that was quick and easy to implement. I suggested Voki and helped Nadine create the first one. It was so easy to do, she was able to create a Voki for each of the other twelve online departments. Each Voki was set up to read the first few lines of the introductory paragraph printed below it. I embedded each Voki onto the associated webpage and voila; the SAO site was quickly up and running! According to Ms. Phillips "Voki improved access to information because the students were able to visually, as well as vocally, interpret the information of all areas of Student Services. Voki was not just informational it was animated and fun to watch and listen to. Students would comment on how pleasant it was to interact with".

To view examples from our online orientation site, please visit our Health & Wellness page at http://www.bergen.edu/sao/health-and-wellness-online-orientation and our Student Life page at http://www.bergen.edu/sao/student-life-online-orientation. Voki is also applicable to other academic disciplines: Students in online Speech classes are often camera shy. Voki can help them practice their opening and closing statements. ESL & Foreign Language students can listen and practice proper pronunciation.

Colleges need new ways of enticing students to read the material and engage in project work. Voki is easy to use and integrate into online courses and web pages. Voki enhances creativity by providing instructors and students a unique persona to match their purpose. Voki is especially good for auditory learning since it can be used as verbal Closed Captioning, without the use of a screen reader. To get started visit Voki.com.

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This article is being published as a proceeding of the 2015 Emerging Learning Design Conference (ELDc 2015).