How to Humanize Your Online Class with VoiceThread

By Michelle Pacansky-Brock

Cover design by Whitney Hack Williams

Copyright 2013 by Michelle Pacansky-Brock

Smashwords Edition

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you’re reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.
Table of Contents

About the Author
Acknowledgments
Introduction

Chapter 1: Maximizing Human Presence
  Reinventing Social Presence
  Text-Voice-Video: What’s the difference?
  Multisensory Learning is Smart Learning
    Mixing Media Files Adds Variety
    Comments Add Depth and Context
    The Doodle Tool Engages the Psychomotor Domain
  Accessibility
    3 Tips for Applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to VoiceThread
    When and What to Transcribe/Caption
    How to Transcribe Voice and Video Comments
    How to Add Closed Captions to a Video Uploaded into a VoiceThread
    How Accessibility Makes a Difference
  A Proven Strategy for Increasing Students' Voluntary Use of Voice/Video Comments
  Chapter 1 Takeaways

Chapter 2: Rethinking Learning
  Scaffolding
  Flow
    Example: Scaffolding with VoiceThread in a Flipped Classroom
    How Formative Assessments Improve Learning
Cultivating Content Creators

An Example of a Student-Edited VoiceThread Activity
An Example of a Student-Created VoiceThread Project

Chapter 2 Takeaways

Chapter 3: 8 Elements of an Effectively Designed VoiceThread

Building a Solid Framework
8 Elements of an Effectively Designed VoiceThread

Chapter 3 Takeaways

Chapter 4: Facilitating Learning with Feedback

Becoming a Teacher...Online
Using Identities & Reordering Comments for Effective Facilitation
Fostering Norms through Feedback
Formative Feedback
Deep Learning - sharing back
Using Feedback Comments to Deliver Micro Lectures

Chapter 4 Takeaways

Continuing Your Learning

References
About the Author

Michelle Pacansky-Brock is a noted college educator, faculty development specialist and the author of *Best Practices for Teaching with Emerging Technologies*. Since she started teaching with VoiceThread, Michelle has received two Sloan-C awards for her online teaching effectiveness. She has also consulted for VoiceThread to provide pedagogical support for its educational community of users and shared her VoiceThread teaching practices in keynote presentations, national conferences and faculty retreats. You can learn more about Michelle on her blog and follow her on Twitter @brocansky.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the generosity of my online students who gave permission to have their comments shared in my work. Their willingness to publicly share their contributions is a reflection of the powerful effect VoiceThread had on their online learning experience and their interest in seeing more instructors adopt VoiceThread. Without their permission, this eBook would be far less interactive and practical for you, as it would lack the video clips that you will find woven throughout each chapter.

I would also like to thank Brad Belbas, Scott James, Jill Leafstedt, and Janet Mitchell-Lambert for the invaluable feedback and generous time they provided in the writing of this book.

Finally, thank you to the rest of the community of VoiceThread users who have contacted me over the years to let me know how much my blog has helped you learn to teach with VoiceThread. Your emails, Tweets, Skypes, Hangouts, and the conversations we have had at conferences have become a growing inspiration in my life to continue to experiment and ask questions about how tools affect student learning and identify more effective ways to support faculty in this ever changing technological landscape.
Introduction

If I were the gambling type, I would bet the interactions you have experienced in online classes have been largely or entirely comprised of text-based communications -- probably discussion forums and text-based announcements. Am I close? Why does this matter so much?

In an online class, the interactions are the guts of the learning. The interactions that occur between an instructor-and-student and student-to-student are the catalysts that enable students to get to know one another as individuals, they are the fuel that weaves the fabric of community, and they hold the power to turn course content into transformative, relevant learning experiences. And all too often online interactions are comprised solely of textual communications, which limit the degree to which students may relate to one another as humans in an online classroom.

For years, online course designers and instructors did not have feasible alternatives to text-based discussion boards and announcements. These were the tools most commonly included in the learning management toolkit and over the years, they became adopted effectively into mainstream online instruction. Audio and video were too problematic because they introduced obstacles for both the instructors and the students. These obstacles included internet bandwidth, accessibility issues for students with disabilities, and, of course, the most obvious challenge was the expense and learning curve of the software needed to record the comments. Those obstacles made video and audio interactions a luxury.

Moreover, many audio/visual tools are synchronous, eliminating the critical asynchronous communication experience, which is essential to engage and support a diverse student population with complex work and personal schedules. In short, identifying a tool that allows for asynchronous, voice or video-based conversations that are easy-to-view from multiple devices and supports accessibility accommodations is a tough order to fill. VoiceThread shifts this playing field.

The social interactions in an online class and personalized feedback shared between an instructor and his or her students are the elements that serve to replace the socialization that occurs in a face-to-face class. And, all too frequently the lack of the human element in online classes is cited as an inherent weakness of online classes. I often shake my head at this argument, as I could easily argue that many or most of my own college (face-to-face) undergraduate classes were not exactly socially stimulating. Yes, I saw and heard my professors regularly but even my most dynamic professors were successful at regularly engaging just a handful of students in a class discussion. And, usually, it was the same small group of students that participated week after week -- and I can assure you I was not one of them. I was timid and self-conscious about speaking up. I felt easily judged by my peers and rarely felt supported and encouraged to speak openly in my classroom settings. I think I was a pretty typical college student.

What you will and won't find in this book

This eBook is concise and will take you through four chapters that are enhanced with brief video excerpts from my online classes (shared with permission from my students). Also sprinkled throughout the book are links to VoiceThread's "Support" pages to assist you with getting more granular, practical help with using the tool. Remember to always consult VoiceThread's Support pages for the most recent updates related to their product.
However, it is important to be clear that this is not a book about how to use VoiceThread. If you want to learn how to create a VoiceThread account, upload files into VoiceThread, leave comments, etc., you will not find your objectives met here. Those answers are located on the VoiceThread Support pages and in the handy VoiceThreads Guides.

So, then, what is this book? Well, if teaching were an art form and if VoiceThread were a medium then you'd be stepping inside my studio to explore how I create my art with VoiceThread. Like all art, there is no singular or best way to complete the process and, of course, judgment is always subjective. But, of course, artists learn from one another by visiting each other’s studios and understanding how they are applying materials in new, experimental ways. This is something I believe we need more of at this moment in education more than anything. Educators need to share and we need to be incentivized, motivated, and inspired to do so.

Icons

This icon is used throughout the eBook to draw attention to opportunities for you to "dig deeper" by clicking on links to video excerpts from my own teaching activities and sample VoiceThread links. "More examples" is a common request VoiceThread gets from faculty users so I hope these links are helpful! The resources allow you the opportunity to dig deeper and view the practices discussed in the book in action. You may choose to click on the links and bookmark some of the videos in your browser for later viewing. This way, you can develop your own library of video resources as you read the eBook.

This icon represents a strategy I have developed that has saved me time or has helped me use VoiceThread more effectively. Some of the tips may save you some frustration.

Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 digs into the topic of human presence and unveils some important research about how and why video and voice are more effective for creating connected, relevant online learning experiences. The opening chapter also explores the ways that VoiceThread aligns with brain-based learning, supports principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and discusses how to ensure the content you create in VoiceThread is 508 compliant.

• Finally, I will share a simple strategy I implemented in my online class that resulted in an increase from 25% to 75% of my online community college students willing to voluntarily participate in voice or video.

Chapter 2 goes deeper into the cultivation of a learning environment with VoiceThread and focuses on recontextualizing the concept of "learning" outside the walls of our formalized institutions of education. We will examine the importance of scaffolding and flow to consider how learning occurs in everyday life.

• I will share a case study from 2009 in which I used VoiceThread to flip my community college art history. In this flipped class example, I used VoiceThread to build in formative assessments into my students' learning and I removed my lectures from the time I spent with my students in the classroom and had the lectures completed online, in the form of enhanced podcasts. The
case study investigates how the integration of VoiceThread as a form of formative assessment (and using class time as a further scaffolding of learning), improved the students' ability to perform at higher order thinking levels and fostered more deep learning.

Secondly, Chapter 2 takes an alternative look at scaffolding and argues that teachers must also scaffold "technology skills" as well as "cognitive skills." In other words, if you teach with VoiceThread, *know the tool* and blend it in with care so that you do not overwhelm your students and, instead, mindfully shepherd them into becoming content creators. Chapter 2 provides detailed discussion and video excerpts of two activities.

- The first is an editing activity my students complete in my online class.
- The second is a summative project my students create which requires each of them to locate, research, and interview a practicing photographer (anywhere in the world) and then create a VoiceThread that analyzes and showcases his/her work.

Chapter 3 is a practical look at how to put together clear, effectively designed VoiceThread activities.

- This chapter outlines 8 Elements of an Effectively Designed VoiceThread with a link to a complete VoiceThread to illustrate the concept. These elements help to ensure students understand what they are accountable for, ensure the instructor is clear about what her/his expectations are of the students, create a workflow that allows slides to be copied for future VoiceThreads, and foster group norms that will grow throughout a class.

Chapter 4, the final chapter, is really when the teaching and learning begins! I share how I use the video and voice commenting feature in VoiceThread to deliver feedback to my students during a VoiceThread learning activity (which would have a start and end date). Leaving feedback will transform your preconceived notions of what online teaching and learning is and it will blow the doors off your students' as well.

- This chapter includes links to videos that demonstrate strategies for using your feedback comments to deliver personalized learning growth roadmaps to individual students, summative messages to groups of students, and share micro-lectures that augment material covered in the learning unit that may include links to websites in follow-up text comments or a simple demonstration in a webcam comment.

As an online instructor myself, I understand how challenging it can be to teach with technology. I believe 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. The more faculty can see what other faculty are doing and learn from their ideas, the more faculty become connected as a community of lifelong learners dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning and the more quickly pedagogical changes will be adopted. As institutions struggle to support the rapid speed of technological change in the face of dwindling budgets, I hope what I share in this book will fill a much needed void, ultimately inspiring you to try something new and share your own practices back with the community.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a brief list of key takeaways summarizing major points to help you review and reflect on the material.

Michelle Pacansky-Brock
Chapter 1: Maximizing Human Presence

VoiceThread resources for this chapter:

- VoiceThread Guides
- Viewing
- Commenting
- Doodling
- Groups and Sharing
- VoiceThread Mobile
- VoiceThread and Accessibility
- VoiceThread Universal

Reinventing Social Presence

"It's not your students' job to remember you. It's your obligation...to make sure they don't have the chance to forget you." - Patricia Fripp

While online classes continue to expand college access to more students than ever, the convenience of online learning brings unique challenges to students, as well. One of these challenges is the feeling of isolation students can experience without physical interaction with their peers and instructor. Research demonstrates that the feelings of isolation some online students experience can interfere with their success (Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002).

Therefore, an important contribution the instructor/facilitator makes in an online class is being actively present. Being aware of constructing of one's presence is not something most college instructors are intuitively used to doing. After all, when you teach in a classroom, your physical presence alone fulfills this requirement to some degree. But in an online classroom, the situation is unique. Your students need you to construct your presence and the more you master this art, the more connected to you and the course they will be. Therefore, teaching online requires a unique set of teaching strategies and tools to foster warm, human connections that will keep learners engaged, eager to learn from one another, and curious to construct knowledge.

In an online class, fostering connections hinges upon the development of social presence. Social presence has been defined as the "degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real' person in mediated communication" (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997, p. 9). Other researchers have focused on social presence as the feeling that one is belongs to a community (Picciano, 2002). While the theories around social
presence are diverse, the focus is on humanizing communications to foster a sense that communications are occurring between real people, rather than digital exchanges of information.

Awhile back, I was teaching a faculty development course about how to use social media to build online community. In one of our discussions, the professors in the class were sharing stories from their classes that demonstrated the importance of social presence. One instructor shared a story that I will never forget—and I share it here so you will not ever forget it either! She had just written an email to one of her online students early in the term with some questions about a particular assignment the student had submitted. The student wrote back to her noting that he was very surprised to receive her email. What was the cause of his surprise? Was he surprised about his performance on the assignment? No. He was surprised that his instructor was a real person! Apparently, he had taken a few online classes before and had never received an email from an instructor. In fact, there was no interaction from the professors that conveyed any type of “human” characteristics—just templated announcements. He shared that he had been under the impression that he was learning from "computers" in his online classes.

Make it your personal commitment right now that this will never happen in one of your classes. Be critical of how your communications are received. Think carefully about how you portray and present yourself online. While we, as professors, wish to maintain a professional demeanor, there is a line between being professional and being mechanical. Students are humans and learning is social. If we strip the humanity out of online learning, we are contributing to the death of education.

While tools are important and we will be spending the bulk of this eBook focusing on how to use VoiceThread effectively to promote warm, human online learning, there are many ways to foster teaching and social presence that are tool agnostic.

**General Strategies for Fostering Teaching and Social Presence Online**

1. Integrate collaborative learning activities.
2. Develop open-ended, critical thinking discussion questions.
3. Use authentic assessments.
4. Share important introductory and expectation documents with students prior to the start of a course.
5. Participate in discussion activities throughout the unit/module.
6. Provide frequent feedback.
7. Strike up conversations with students by asking questions.
8. Address students by name.
9. Share personal stories and professional experiences in the teaching of concepts.
10. Promptly reply to student questions.
11. Provide options when possible.

(Adapted from Aragon, 2003)

Teaching online with VoiceThread creates new, uncharted dimensions of teaching presence and social presence. When your class is designed around active, multisensory asynchronous learning and supported with clearly communicated expectations, beautiful learning moments emerge between students that are unique from the face-face experience. Students, who interact in a non-hierarchical, community-based learning environment, will all be required to participate. In this type of flat learning environment, the instructor is there actively sharing feedback and leveraging the comments to further teach, provide extra contextual information about the topics at hand, guide inquiry, and even share links with students as needed. These asynchronous interactions shared in voice, video, and text are highly personalized and include the voices of all students, not just the small group of outspoken students who typically contribute.
in a face-to-face class.

As I have taught with VoiceThread over the years, I have reflected and learned a great deal about my teaching and my students. I have a better understanding of who my students are as individuals, what their unique needs are, and how to respond to these needs instructionally. I have also watched in awe as the connections between my learners have grown to new heights. However, the depth of the social presence that develops in each class is always different (just like in face-to-face classes). What I understand is that these outcomes are not outcomes of VoiceThread, the tool. These are outcomes the relationships that the tool enables me to foster with my students. Tools cannot teach; only teachers can ignite passion and learning in students.

When online students are given the opportunity to see and hear each other, interactions become more personalized, students have more opportunities to relate to one another, and there is less chance of hurt feelings or misinterpreted intentions. My online students share that VoiceThread is an effective tool for building a sense of community and increasing their sense that I am present in their learning as an effect of my audio and video comments.

Text-Voice-Video: What's the difference?

![The Social Presence Continuum](image)

*Figure 1.1 Text, voice, and video set within a continuum of social presence.*

As you design your online classes, the tools you select have the potential to increase your teaching and social presence. For example, if you communicate with your online students through audio you will convey a higher social presence than using text-based communications throughout your entire class (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, Wells, 2007). Naturally, if I have the opportunity to listen to your voice, it would convey more to me about you and your message than reading words you have sent through digital text. By listening to the nuances and inflections in your voice, I would sense your mood, your energy level, your sincerity, and your attempts at humor. The human voice creates a more vulnerable communication experience than text, laying a context for relationships to grow and develop. Further, videos may communicate an even higher degree of social presence than a voice message, as they share gestures and body movements, as well as represent the surroundings of the subject, which can also convey a great deal about a person.
As an online instructor, these distinctions in social presence between text, voice, and video are important not only to be aware of, but to masterfully use in a mindful way throughout your class. Video certainly is not necessary for everything. But when is it best used? And when is text more effective?

For example, if you are delivering sensitive feedback to a student who is struggling in your class, would that feedback be best received through writing or through a video message? If you are sending a brief announcement about the gradebook being updated, does that need to be a video or would text suffice? When you open a new module in your online course each week, consider sharing a 3-5 minute micro-lecture that provides the milestones of the unit. Share this with your students in a video but also share the transcript for those who might prefer to or need to read it.

With that said, text-based communications alone have certainly been used to foster effective online learning for years. But interacting solely with text communications like email, discussion forums, blog posts, and instant messages week-after-week, leaves out important social dimensions to a learning experience that can now easily be fostered through technologies readily accessible to instructors and learners.

After I began using a weekly video announcement (with a text transcript) in my online class, I was greeted in the parking lot on campus by one of my online student (who I had never met face-to-face). He was so excited that he was able to recognize me from the videos. We spent time talking about the class and his plans to continue his degree. It was a special moment for me, as it was when I realized how important these social connections are between an instructor and student. Too frequently, they are lost in online classes. Today, with simple video technologies, webcams, and smartphones, we all have the power to rekindle them.

Audio

For starters, integrating audio into an online learning environment will infuse the warmth and nuance of the human voice, reduce hurt feelings and misinterpretations that commonly occur in discussion forums, as well as when students read written instructor feedback. As one of my own online students noted after the completion of my History of Photography class in the Fall of 2012, “[By listening to the audio comments,] I felt more connected to [my peers] and, as a result, more invested in the class as a whole.” For this student, reading text comments was not nearly as effective as listening to the voice comments left by his/her peers.

This student perspective was also validated in the 2007 research of Ice, Curtis, Philips, & Wells which demonstrated that asynchronous audio feedback in an online class was more effective than text-based feedback for the following reasons: when online students could hear the nuance in their instructor’s voice they understood and could apply the feedback more effectively, felt more involved in a learning community, noted an increase in learning retention, and shared an increased sense that their instructor cared about them.

How easy is it to leave a voice comment in a VoiceThread? Well, if you have a microphone on your computer or a USB microphone you can plug into your computer, it’s as simple as clicking “Comment,” selecting the “Mic” option and starting to speak. Or you have the option to record using the mobile app on your iPhone or iPad -- which is something I do sometimes while I’m in the car (in the passenger seat, of
course) or find myself in the waiting room at a doctor's or dentist's office.

**Video**

But let's kick things up a notch. If hearing from an instructor improves a student's emotional and cognitive functions in a class, imagine what seeing an instructor does. And using video in a VoiceThread could not be simpler. In fact, if you have an iPhone in your pocket right now or a webcam on your computer, guess what? You can create a video comment in a VoiceThread right now from where you are seated and share it with your students with the click of a button. And so can your students.

A study by Borup and West (2012) validates that asynchronous video feedback improves an instructor's social presence, as well as the social presence between peers on a smaller scale (however, there are a variety of factors that can contribute to the degree to which students relate to one another in an online class). In this study, several college classes utilized a variety of instructional tools and strategies to deliver the video feedback and VoiceThread was one of the tools included. The students in the study agreed that the video feedback helped to keep them motivated and connected to their instructor more than text-based feedback would have. One student noted, “There's just something about seeing [the instructor's] face instead of just text that makes it seem more real” (Borup and West, 2012, p. 199).

The Borup and West study shows that the use of asynchronous video helps online students to establish an emotional connection with their instructor and create a sense of who s/he is as a person. Another study by Kaupp (2012) revealed that lack of a student-instructor relationship in an online class is a factor that may contribute to the significant achievement gap between White and Latino online students in California’s community colleges. These findings further demonstrate the importance of mindfully selecting communicating tools that foster social presence in an online class.

Asynchronous voice and video communications may also improve a sense of community in blended learning environments too. In 2009, I conducted a flipped classroom experiment with my community college art history class (discussed in detail in chapter 2) and utilized VoiceThread as a formative assessment tool. Students participated in the VoiceThreads after viewing or listening to a mobile lecture prior to coming to a face-to-face class and then again after class to polish higher order thinking skills. Interestingly, even when used to enhance face-to-face learning, 81% of students strongly agreed or agreed that VoiceThread increased their sense of community when they were in class (77% response rate).
According to Bloom's, each learning domain consists of a series of horizontal levels, constructed in the form of a pyramid through which a learner moves from the bottom to the top. As the learner acquires the foundational lower levels in a domain, he uses these skills to master the next level, moving all the way to the top of the pyramid, which symbolizes the highest orders of learning in the domain. The domain of cognition relates to the development of knowledge, affection relates to how an individual relates and develops emotionally to others, and psychomotor relates to the manipulation of a physical object or expression. All of these elements play a role in an effective learning experience, like instruments contributing to the robust, dynamic sound of an orchestra.

As educators, we too frequently stumble into an online teaching experience with a limited toolkit in hand, making it difficult to foster learning experiences that actively support all three domains of learning. By learning to teach with VoiceThread, you will be adding a single tool to your teaching toolkit that will support your students' brain-based learning.

The human brain is wired to seek multisensory learning experiences. This does not change when a person enrolls in an online class. Unfortunately, online students are often met, instead, with lists of tasks to complete: read chapter six, complete this quiz, respond to these prompts in a discussion forum, etc. When instruction becomes an assembly line, students are not presented opportunities to engage in the content, to construct their knowledge around meaningful experiences, to grow as learners, to make mistakes, to ask questions, to relate to their peers, to reflect on feedback from their instructor and their learning community, and to learn from their mistakes.

Constructing an active learning environment with VoiceThread facilitates a student-centered learning experience that is not only constructivist in nature but also situates the student within a dynamic context of her peers’ voices, physical expressions, photographs, videos of historical and current events.

Mixing media files adds variety!
The foundation of a VoiceThread is the media files the creator has selected to upload into it. What’s important to remember is that VoiceThread transforms the media you select and upload into a dynamic, conversational exchange (the audience is determined by you in the Share step). Keep in mind that the media you upload into a VoiceThread may include:

- Powerpoint or Keynote slides (this is how you mix images and text on a VoiceThread slide). When working with presentation slides, you must export all Keynote presentations to a PDF before uploading to VoiceThread. This is also advised for Powerpoint file too. All content in your presentation slides will be converted to still images so don't spend time with fancy animations or builds on your slides -- they will not appear. Also, videos must be uploaded as separate files (not within a presentation).

- Image files. Use the built-in Flickr search to locate images shared with Creative Commons licenses, pull images from the shared collection at the New York Public Library, upload from your own computer, or from the web.

- Video files. Videos must be saved to your computer and uploaded into VoiceThread directly.
There are some video codecs that are not supported by VoiceThread so you are advised to experiment with a sample video to ensure your file type is supported. Videos can be fabulous options for critiquing student presentations in a public speaking class, analyzing a scenario of a job interview to have students identify what the interviewee did well or not well, upload a screencast of a mini-lecture you created using Camtasia, Screenflow, or Screencast-o-matic.com! YouTube videos are not directly supported.

- Audio files. Great for music classes or for analyzing the variations in heart murmurs!
- PDFs
- MS Word Docs (may be difficult to read)
- Excel Files (may be difficult to read)
- and more!
- Don’t forget you can mix all these file types within a single VoiceThread!

As you can imagine, the variety of media you can integrate into your VoiceThread creates a foundation of multisensory opportunities around which conversations may unfold.

Comments add depth and context
After you upload your media files, however, you will leave your own comments on your media (or slides). These comments may be left in voice, video or text. Keep in mind that voice and video comments will improve your online social presence and when you integrate voice/video content that will be used for more than one term that auditory content must be made available in text form as well to be compliant with federal regulations (see Accessibility section below) and to ensure your instructional content is accessible to students who may require this accommodation.

As the creator of the VoiceThread, comments are an opportunity for you to add your presence and your story to your media. They are an opportunity to create a layer of inquiry to a photograph or set a historical context for a video clip. Use the comments to create context and elicit curiosity and evoke conversation and dialogue from your students. But be brief. Focus your ideas. Know what you want to say before you speak.

As your students come into your VoiceThread, remember the value that your continued presence will play in their learning. By having an active presence throughout the duration of the activity (and it does not need to be continuous, maybe it is on one or two specific days of the week that you participate -- identify your and communicate it to your students), your feedback will continue to add value to your students' learning. Strategies for delivering effective comments will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

When students participate and leave their comments, this opens yet another pathway to learning. When a student clicks the "comment" button, she is provided with an option to choose between commenting in voice, video, or text. I have found that most students (this reflects my experiences teaching community college), when given the option, will choose to comment in text. This surprises many instructors. If you
experience this same issue and wish to improve the percentage of voluntary voice or video comments your students leave, refer to the strategy I share at the end of this chapter!

The student comments are what activate your VoiceThread. This is when things come to life and you will find yourself getting excited! When students have the opportunity to comment, they become active participants in the construction of their own knowledge too. By speaking through their ideas (if they speak their ideas, remember leaving a text comment is an option) they will have to process them in a much different way than if they were communicating through writing. Integrating verbal assessments/discussions into a course along with written assessments (essays, blogs, etc.) is an effective way to integrate a variety of expression options for students and accommodate their diverse learning needs, as well.

All brains are wired differently. Shouldn't they be offered the opportunity to learn in different ways?

The Doodle tool engages the psychomotor domain
One of the most powerful (and perhaps underused) features in VoiceThread is the Doodle tool. It engages the psychomotor domain of learning by providing learners the opportunity to annotate directly on a piece of media by using their mouse or the gesture of their hand if they recording with the VoiceThread mobile app.

- How to find the Doodle tool.
- How to Doodle on a slide with VoiceThread Mobile.

As you read this eBook, be thinking about how the Doodle tool can be leveraged as a learning assessment tool in your activities. For example, the video shared below illustrates one of my former online art history students using the Doodle tool to identify an example of implied line in a work of art. Prior to teaching with VoiceThread, I would have spent hours building an exam in a course management system including images with letters annotated on the images. The students would have been asked questions like, “Which letter in this image marks a point in the painting that shows an example of an implied line?”

Watch this video and reflect on how much more inclusively this students’ mastery is assessed through the VoiceThread compared to a standardized assessment.

Click here to view a video excerpt from a VoiceThread that shows a student demonstrating her mastery of how to identify visual concepts in a work of art, while annotating her findings with the Doodle tool.

The learner in the video shared above is shown applying a concept to a work of art reasoning processes through a verbal presentation and engaging her psychomotor domain by annotating on the image with the Doodle tool. Now, which of the two “learning experiences” – the VoiceThread activity or the multiple choice quiz -- do you think this learner would have learned more deeply from? Which would enable her to move into the higher cognitive levels and begin to evaluate and critique images?
“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it'll spend its whole life believing its stupid.” -Albert Einstein

What does it mean for a learning environment to be “universally accessible”? Learning comes in all different varieties of colors, shapes, and sizes. The complexity of the human brain and the ways that it varies from individual to individual and reacts from situation to situation is nowhere near understood. Yet, it is safe to say we do not all learn the same and expecting a class of 20, 30, 40 or more students to all learn to the same degree using the same materials and the same approach to assessment in the same duration of time is illogical. It would be like forcing the beauty, complexity, and variation of the human brain into an assembly line. Yet, that’s the model formalized education leverages.

There are many efforts underway to encourage inclusive approaches for designing learning environments that support the needs of all learners. One notable effort is the National Center on the Universal Design for Learning. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a set of three simple principles and clear, comprehensive guidelines for educators to use as a framework to design learning environments that are scaffolded to support the skills, needs, and interests of all learners.

VoiceThread’s multisensory environment is a single, unique tool that educators can leverage to develop a class that is designed with UDL principles in mind. For example, the following list includes principles of UDL and ideas for how they can be met with VoiceThread:

### 3 Tips for Applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to VoiceThread

1. **Present information and content in different ways.**

   - Upload a video into a VoiceThread that represents a demonstration of a complex nursing procedure that is described in written form in the students' textbook.

   - **Add captions to the video (mentioned above) using VoiceThread’s closed caption tool.**

   - Upload an image into VoiceThread that illustrates a portrait of a historical figure referenced in an article that students are assigned to read.

   - Have each student leave one comment on the slide, sharing one takeaway from the article that changed how they view the image.

   - Use the video commenting feature to prompt students decode the image together as a group. Prompt them to identify who is illustrated, what the person is remembered for, how the person impacts life today, and give specific examples from the article of how the students' lives would be different if this person had never lived (this last part engages divergent thinking!). It is a great idea to include several of these slides in a VoiceThread and then give students an option...
to comment on one or two (depending on your class size) to reduce the redundancy in the comments).

2. Differentiate the ways that students can express what they know.

- Provide students with the option to comment in voice, video, or text (hey, this is built right in!). Give students the option to comment from multiple devices (this one is built in too!). With VoiceThread, students can choose between leaving comments using:

  - VoiceThread.com, a flash-based player on a regular browser
  - VoiceThread Universal, an html environment that is screen reader accessible
  - VoiceThread mobile app, which supports iPads and iPhones


- Have students view a video about “What is feminism?” in a VoiceThread. After the video, leave a comment that encourages students to reflect on the video and spend some time speaking with family and friends about it. Have them come back to the VoiceThread before a specific date. And then on the next slide include a prompt for them to leave a voice or video comment in which they share the perspective of one friend or family member about “What feminism means to them.” This approach encourages students to relate a curricular concept to their immediate social group and immediately gives them something to discuss, rather than a prompt that asks them to “share how they feel” which can be a very intimidating experience for students at the start of a class. This approach can also increase the generational representation of the perspectives in a group.

- In a biology class (or any class in which a field trip would work), break students into small groups. Ensure at least one student in the group has a mobile device with the VoiceThread app installed on it. Send the students on a scavenger hunt, making their goal to collect photographs of specific biological specimens. This may require multiple trips and research to identify where the specimens would be located in their natural habitat. Have them document the context of each specific with their voice comments, making detailed descriptions of what they see and even recording the GPS coordinates using the map app on their smartphone.

- Share a VoiceThread with a Group that includes students in your class. Give those students “Editing” privileges to this VoiceThread. This allows the group members to be able to upload slides to the VoiceThread. I think of this as making a VoiceThread wiki-like! Once you do this, you can get very creative with your activity.

- In chapter two, I discuss an editing activity from my own class titled "Visual Thinking" in which my students co-curate a learning unit about mid-20th century photographers, flipping the traditional hierarchy that situates the professor as the content creator and decision maker about what material gets covered.

When and what to transcribe/caption
Electronic instructional content must also adhere to The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as well as other local requirements. The High Tech Training Center Unit (HTCU) of the California Community College system, the largest system of higher education in the nation which is comprised of 112 colleges and serves roughly 2.5 million students, has produced a captioning guidance document which demystifies some of the confusion about what types of content must be captioned vs. transcribed and when the content may go without captions or a transcript.

One very helpful rule of thumb, per the HTCU, is "If you're keeping it and more than a limited audience might access it, then caption or transcribe it." Therefore, comments in your VoiceThread that have the duration of a single class (i.e. student-student and instructor-student interactions) have different criteria when it comes to federal compliance standards than comments you make in a VoiceThread that are intended to be copied and re-used from term to term.

- **Must be captioned/transcribed**
  - Voice or video comments you intend to use for more than one term.
  - Videos uploaded into a VoiceThread that are used for more than one term.

- **Does not need to be captioned/transcribed:**
  - Voice or video comments that will exist for the period of one term (unless required for a student accommodation). Access to this content must also be restricted to registered students of the class, which can only be done by sharing the VoiceThread with a Group.

How to transcribe voice and video comments

To create a transcribed version of a video or voice comment, you can simply use VoiceThread’s text commenting feature. To do so, type or paste the transcript of the voice or video comment into a text comment that plays after your audio/video comment. Alternatively, I have spoken with one faculty member who uses Dragon Naturally Speaking’s remote microphone app (on her iPhone) to dictate her voice comments as she records them into VoiceThread. This allows her to create a text-based transcript on her screen (in Dragon) that she simply copies and pastes into a text comment immediately after she has saved her voice comment. That is smart!

Below is a link to a sample VoiceThread that demonstrates the use of text comments that function as transcripts of voice and video comments. Prior to leaving these text comments, I toggled to a new VoiceThread “Identity” that I named “text version of Michelle’s comment” and I uploaded an avatar (profile picture) for that Identity that includes the word “Text” (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion about how to use Identities). This, of course, is not required but I like using this strategy because it would provide a deaf student with a visual marker to indicate that there is a text comment available to listen to, rather than to keep it buried and invisible. Without the visual marker, there would be no way for a deaf student to know the text version of the comment was there unless he sat and waited for it to play or if someone informed him it was there.

Click here to view my Sample Syllabus Overview VoiceThread that demonstrates
the use of text comments I made with a unique "Identity." Each text comment functions as a transcript of voice or video comment that precedes it.

How to add closed captions to a video uploaded into a VoiceThread
To add closed captions to a video you have uploaded into a VoiceThread, use VoiceThread’s captioning tool. This requires you to have a time-stamped captioning file to begin the process. If you don’t have one, pay a visit to your support resource on campus or you could upload your video to YouTube and caption the video there. Once the video is captioned on YouTube, you can download the caption file in .SBV file format and upload the .SBV file into VoiceThread’s caption tool.

Click here to learn how to add closed captions to a video in a VoiceThread.

TIP!
If you make a copy of a VoiceThread that contains a captioned video, you will lose your captions. The newly created VoiceThread containing the video will need to be captioned again.

How accessibility makes a difference
I’d like to share a story with you about one of my students and what she taught me about accessibility. In 2007, I decided to start teaching with VoiceThread because it was a visually-centric tool and I was teaching art history in a text-dominated LMS. In other words, improving the pedagogy in my course, not its accessibility, was what motivated me to use VoiceThread. But within the first year, as I listened to the feedback my students shared about VoiceThread, the tool’s community building potential was becoming clear and I was also about to learn an incredible lesson about how my own teaching approaches had been excluding a portion of my learners’ abilities.

I had a student in my online class who I will call “Sara.” She was dyslexic and I knew this because she had shared this with me through a private exchange we had at the start of the class. As an instructor at a large, public community college, it was not unusual for me to have dyslexic students. Sara also shared with me that she was taking my online class because she was very ill and preparing for a major surgery.

One day, I clicked on a comment Sara had submitted in a formative assessment VoiceThread for our Art
Appreciation class. The prompt on the slide on which she commented asked the students to "describe the content or form of the work of art illustrated on the slide." These were new terms to these introductory students. Sara was the only student in the class who chose to use the webcam commenting feature. Watching and listening to her comment allowed me the opportunity to look into her eyes and see her inflection as she interpreted an austere, pained etching made by a modern, German artist named Käthe Kollwitz who survived two wars, was condemned by the Nazis, and lived through the death of her son and grandson at war. Most student comments at this point in the class hinged on "I like it" or "it's weird." Sara's comment communicated ideas clearly and they were deep, emotional ideas that had an emotional vulnerability to them, as they were shared in video. Sara was already making deeper affective connections with the artwork, something most students did not do until later in the class and some never do at all.

However, Sara's terrific verbal comment was not what I find memorable about this teaching experience. On the contrary, it is the gap I quickly identified with her writing abilities when I reflected on the emails she had written to me and posts she had made in our discussion forum. Quickly, my mind began to scan through all the dyslexic learners I had in recent memory and I began to realize how much I, how much we, fail these learners by not providing more accessible learning environments to empower them to demonstrate what they know. By granting her the option to express herself in video, rather than always through writing, she was liberated. I reflect on that moment each semester I listen to my students in my VoiceThreads. I have grown immensely as a teacher because of that moment.

There seems to be a one-way road of logic in higher education that drives thinking around the topic of "accessibility." I hear symptoms of this problem all the time. "You can't use that tool. It isn't accessible...is it?" We have grown to become so concerned about being non-compliant with legal regulations and technology has changed the nature of content so much that many faculty, instructional designers, and administrators are more likely to avoid tools that integrate video and voice out of fear that they are not compliant. As a result, we revert back to fully text-based learning environments thinking they're better -- they're more accessible. Well, we need to realize, first, that text-based environments are not accessible to many learners.

Learners need variety in their learning materials. They need to learn in rich visual environments and to be able to hear their peers' and instructor's voices and have the option to see their warm presence. My advice to every faculty member who confronts the, "No, you can't use that tool" barrier is to ask why. First, to be sure accessibility remains an open dialogue that we all continue to learn about. Secondly, to ensure there is a good understanding of the tool and accessibility that is guiding that decision. You might be surprised to know that one of the very first universities to adopt VoiceThread was Gallaudet University, the world's largest university for the deaf and hard of hearing. Why? Because VoiceThread's video commenting tool empowers groups deaf users to seamlessly converse asynchronously in video, an experience that was not achievable on a large-scale, at a low cost before VoiceThread's release in 2007.

return to top

A proven strategy for increasing students' voluntary use of voice/video comments
By now you should have a solid understanding about why a steady flow of voice and video comments is
an integral component of successful learning in a VoiceThread. Unfortunately, however, you may find that your students are not as willing to jump in and participate in asynchronous online voice and video conversations as we might expect or hope.

In fact, I analyzed my VoiceThread activities from three years of teaching with VoiceThread: 2007-2008, 2008-2009, and 2011 and I was surprised to find that even though there was a variation in the courses and institutions at which I taught, the percentage of students that chose voice or video over text when given a choice remained steady at 25%.

By 2011, I was deeply reflecting on the data I had collected about the strong community that the small percentage of voice and video comments had been fostering in my online classes. But I was also noticing two persistent themes in the responses left to the open-ended question in my student survey at the end of the semester when I asked, “Is there anything else you would like to share with me about VoiceThread?” I commonly heard, comments along the lines of “I really wish more students would comment in voice,” as well as, “Thank you so much for not requiring us to comment in voice.” Hmm.

The more I trudged through these comments, I uncovered another theme. I included an open-ended question in the survey to understand how students feel when asked to leave a voice comment or when they left their first voice comment and, hands down, the number one response I would get to that question was “nervous.” At the end of the semester when I ask more questions about their experiences using VoiceThread, I also receive a lot of comments from students that reflect on how they felt listening to their own voice. I frequently hear things like, “I don’t like the way I sound” or “I sound stupid when I talk. I would rather write.” While I am sensitive to the many different reasons why students might not want to speak, I wanted to dig deeper.

I also reflected on a few exterior forces impacting higher education. The growing increase in text messaging as a preferred method of communication in the United States was one trend that was on my mind. How was this impacting the interpersonal skills of our younger generation? In 2011, cell phone owners between 18-24 sent an average of 3,200 texts per month (Smith, 2011). I recalled my niece who mentioned she had broken up with her boyfriend by changing her status update on Facebook. And I began to notice how my son, who recently got his first mobile phone, was texting with girls but never seemed to speak on the phone with them. What did these shifts mean and how would they impact relationships?

And what about verbal skills? How is the increasing growth in online learning affecting the verbal skills of our college graduates, or is it? In 2011, 32% of college students in the U.S. were enrolled in at least one online class. The growth in online course enrollments continues to dwarf higher ed growth overall, which actually declined from 2010-2011 (Allen and Seaman, 2012). When we peel back these data points, however and investigate how our students are learning within these online courses, some interesting questions surface. As we’ve already considered, few online courses today integrate video or even voice as an option for student-student interactions. Last year, I had one student in my class who shared that she had completed more than 20 college level courses online. Guess how many of those classes required her to speak? That’s right, not one. So, I am left with a vision of the future of American higher education as it continues to morph into a blended learning landscape and the dialogue about the relevance of requiring our online students to speak remains curiously absent.

Finally, I observed an increasing number of employers using Skype to conduct first job round interviews.
in an effort to save money. The ability to present oneself on a webcam and speak clearly through web-based audio and video communications, synchronous and asynchronous, is becoming an increasingly important skill for success in the 21st century not only for interviewing but also for the ability to work effectively from home, which represents 13.4 million U.S. employees in 2012 according to the 2012 Census Bureau Report. Communicating and presenting oneself effectively through online audio and video communications are not skills that are typically fostered through a student’s traditional college completion journey.

These factors propelled me to make a change in my teaching. In the Spring of 2012, I introduced an intervention into my online class that was intended to improve the number of voice or video comments my online students would willingly leave in my VoiceThreads. The chart below illustrates the percentage of students who willingly left voice or video comments the preceding semester, in the Fall of 2011, in five consecutive required VoiceThread activities (students were required to participate but were given the choice to comment in voice, video or text). The average percentage of voice/video comments left by students in the Fall of 2011 (before the intervention) was 26%.

![Figure 1.2 Percentage of voice/video comments voluntarily left by students in Fall 2011.](image)

The following semester, Spring 2012, I made a few changes. First, I revised the very first VoiceThread activity in a few different ways. Rather than having it be an assessment that truly measured my students’ learning of concepts from our first learning unit, I turned the first VoiceThread into a low-risk, friendly ice breaker called “Photographs that Changed the World.” The ice breaker, part of my online History of Photography class, required students to preview a selection of historic Life photographs I had uploaded for them and select one that, in their opinion, changed the world in some way. Then in a "reflective" comment, they were required to speak using the voice or video commenting feature and justify how the photograph changed the world.
That’s right, despite the fact that I knew my students were terribly nervous about leaving voice or video comments and only 25% of them willingly wanted to do it, I required all of them to. Why would I do such an evil thing? Well, aside from all the reasons cited above, I had a hypothesis about some social norming that occurred early in the class. My theory was that each student established their place within their peer group, with regards to how they perceived their verbal speaking ability. Once a student had established their rank in this hierarchy, encouraging them to readjust it was a futile effort.

The norming looked something like this: when the class was assigned a VoiceThread activity and all students were given the option to comment in voice, video or text, the articulate, well spoken students felt confident and chose to leave their comments in voice without hesitation. The reluctant, self-conscious students would hear those comments and their initial intrigue or possible willingness to attempt to venture into the voice commenting experience would chill and they would grow even more reluctant about how they would sound to their peers. The gap would continue to grow. As the weeks went on, the same few students would choose to speak and despite my efforts to encourage the rest of the students to try the voice or video comments little would ever change throughout the semester. This was the typical pattern I observed for years.

So, my intervention was designed with the interest of having all my students start off a flat, equal playing field. That was my strategy. Here is how it played out.

I should stress that I also moved the original first VoiceThread from week one to week two of the class. Week one was redesigned to now be spent on “Getting Started.” Students joined our class VoiceThread Group, they also viewed a Syllabus Overview I had created in VoiceThread along with the PDF of their syllabus, and they completed a Google Form survey that provided me with a detailed picture of the class's technology access, comfort level, and gave students the option to share concerns with me directly. Before the end of week one, I contacted any student who did not have access to a computer with a microphone, a webcam, or a device supported by the VoiceThread mobile app. I was able to add free phone commenting minutes to these students' Basic accounts (the type of accounts that are included in premium account options). However, I did not have any students who required this accommodation the first semester and now that I have been doing this for two years, there has only been one or two students who have need the accommodation. These couple of students ended up either borrowing or purchasing a microphone to use for the class rather than using the phone commenting minutes.

Here are the fascinating results. After the first VoiceThread that required all students to comment in voice or video, I then shared all the exact same VoiceThread activities from the previous semester and gave students the option to comment in voice, video or text. I would like to be clear that I still give students the option to comment in any way they want in most of the activities throughout the semester. I understand that many students have very good reasons for not wanting to speak. For example, some students struggle with severe stuttering challenges, others do their work in environments that make leaving voice or video comments virtually impossible, and some feel very self-conscious about accents and that is something I am sensitive to. So, I understand that choice is important. Even with choice still being a fundamental part of the equation, the graphic below illustrates that the percentage of students who willingly commented in
voice or video after the change increased from 26% to 76% on average.

![Figure 1.3 Change in percentage of voice or video comments left by students before and after the course redesign.](image)

The implications of this are compelling for many reasons. First, this experiment demonstrates the value of creating a trustworthy, supportive, community-based environment in which students are encouraged to take risks and learn in ways that may not feel comfortable. It also demonstrates the role that the social dimensions of online learning play in the students’ success. Too frequently, lack of student participation in voice or video may be attributed to laziness or lack of technological access from the perspective of an instructor. We must dig deeper to really understand the factors informing these trends.

Here is a comment from a student who reflected on her growth from the beginning of the class to the end and the value VoiceThread provided in her learning:

“I hate my voice so listening to it was very nerve wrecking [sic]! At first, I was nervous about using VoiceThread because it was new to me, but that quickly turned into a tool that I found to be most useful. It was fun and made the class more interactive. In my opinion, the online class would be a bit boring without VoiceThread.”

Finally, the feedback that students shared with me through the end of the semester survey revealed some compelling findings. Many further validate ideas already discussed above about social presence improving cognition and community. These will not be repeated here. But what was new and exciting were the revelations students shared about other factors not explored in other studies. For example:

- 95% of students strongly agreed or agreed that communicating effectively with online audio and video technologies is an important 21st century skill

- 83% of students strongly agreed or agreed that the class had improved their confidence with using audio and video communications.
78% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they noticed an improvement in their ability to communicate more clearly in their voice/video comments.

These findings reveal new avenues worth exploring and suggest having students interact using online asynchronous voice and video communications in online classes may contribute much more to online learning than improving social presence alone.

Click here to Learning Out Loud, a one-hour webinar detailing the study described above.

Chapter 1 Take Aways

1. Social presence improves community and learning in an online class.
2. The use of asynchronous voice and video communications increases social presence.
3. Learning retention increases when multiple senses are stimulated.
4. VoiceThread’s rich, multisensory environment is well suited to support the principles of Universal Design for Learning.
5. VoiceThread Universal is an html interface that supports users who rely upon screen readers to access web-based content. Each VoiceThread you create is automatically available to any user with a VoiceThread account in VoiceThread Universal after you share each VoiceThread with those users.
6. Audio and video content in a VoiceThread that is re-used from one class to the next must be transcribed or closed captioned to ensure equal access is provided to all students as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and by section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.
7. Instructor audio or video comments may be transcribed using the text commenting feature. Click here is an example of a VoiceThread that uses the text commenting feature to transcribe voice/video comments.
8. Videos uploaded into VoiceThread can be captioned using VoiceThread’s closed-captioned tool.
9. VoiceThreads can be easily copied and re-used in your other classes. After you copy a VoiceThread, be aware that any captions that were added to videos will need to be created again.
10. Based on a study with community college students, only about 25% of students willingly choose to comment in voice or video throughout the course of a semester long class when given the option to choose between voice, video or text.
11. Increasing the percentages of voice/video comments in a class is an important strategy to increase social presence and build community.
12. Anxiety is a major factor that prevents students from voluntarily commenting in voice or video, even when VoiceThread activities are securely shared with just the registered students in the class.

13. An effective strategy for increasing the percentage of students who leave voice/video comments in VoiceThread includes these following steps:

- Ensure all students in your class have access to the technology required to leave a voice or video comment.

- Deploy a simple online survey in which you have your students self-identify how which method they will use to leave their voice or video comment: microphone, webcam, mobile app, or phone comment.

- Ensure students who require phone commenting minutes have a Basic VoiceThread account or set them up with one using the VoiceThread Manager in your Premium account. In the Manager, distribute phone commenting minutes to those students (contact your department or site administrator for details).

- Make the very first VoiceThread activity in your class a low risk ice breaker.

- Give students the choice to comment in voice, video, or text moving forward but continue to encourage voice and video comments, mention to your students who do comment in voice how great it is to hear them, and model the value of voice/video comments by regularly using them yourself.

return to top
Chapter 2: Rethinking Learning

VoiceThread resources for this chapter:

- VoiceThread Guides
- Creating
- Groups and Sharing
- How do I let another person edit a VoiceThread I created?

When academics understand and embrace learning as process that occurs each and every day of life -- outside the walls of a classroom -- it is unveiled as a social process that demands rich interactions with individuals, as well as contextual experiences. For an individual to progress from a novice to an expert, she or he needs much more than access to high quality content and the ability to demonstrate one's acquisition of this information. Placing an emphasis on learning in higher education places students in the center of an active, constructivist environment in which the instructor becomes the facilitator of a process that continuously supports students on their journey through their progress. This is a paradigm shift for most college instructors who were most likely taught themselves through the western model of the academy, which has been predicated upon the transfer of knowledge from expert to pupil.

To learn requires one to develop or grow from one point, level, place to another. Learning occurs within a context that enables a person to demonstrate his abilities, make mistakes, step back, understand what went wrong, learn from the error and build upon that gap to promote growth. In the context of learning, error is not only ok, it is fundamental.

**Scaffolding**

This is where the concept of scaffolding comes into play in the design of your course. Scaffolding may be best explained with a simple example from everyday life. When children are young, they require guidance from parents. Without the necessary words to communicate what it is that a child wants, he may begin to point. A parent or caregiver may respond and question back to the child, "Do you want the ball or do you want the juice?" These questions work to bridge the child's knowledge from where he is to where his verbal skills will develop (create a bridge from point A to point B). The questioning challenges him to apply what he knows, as well as go further by taking a risk to say a new word or point to an object to create an association with a new word. The adult interacting with the child in this way has offered an example of scaffolding to support the child's development.

Scaffolding involves building in support for learning throughout the layers of a learning process to enable learners to grow and develop. Wood, Brunner, and Ross (1976) note that scaffolding is a process that "can potentially achieve much more for the learner than an assisted completion of the task. It may result, eventually, in development of task competence by the learner at a pace that would far outstrip his unassisted efforts." Thus, scaffolding is unique from "helping" and "assisting" students. It is a way to challenge a learner to apply what he knows and take his skills to the next level.

If you were building a house, you would rely upon wood scaffolding to hold essential walls and beams in
place as the rest of the construction is built up around them. Once the area is strong enough to stand on its own, the scaffolding would be removed. This metaphor helps us to understand how scaffolding works in a class. The scaffolding enables learners to grow and move on to more advanced levels of learning.

Flow
The Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi stresses the importance of flow, rather than student engagement, in cultivating an effective learning environment. Flow is a state of mind in which a learner is acutely focused, absorbed, fully engrossed. Surely, each of us can reflect on an experience in which we have completely been within ourself, absorbed by our experience and felt somewhat of a disconnect from our physical surroundings. I often experience a state of flow when I'm writing a blog post that I feel exceptionally passionate about or editing a video. I also remember spending entire days in the dark room in college consumed by the need to get the perfect black and white photograph -- not eating or drinking or using the bathroom -- as if my bodily functions just shut down. The hours would simply escape me.

While flow is largely tied to intrinsic motivation, within formalized learning there are key strategies that correlate with the effectiveness of achieving flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi (Aguilar, 2012). These include:

1. The activity should be preceded with clearly communicated learning objectives.
2. The objectives should be achievable to all learners, yet challenging.
3. Clear, timely, and formative feedback should be provided.

This eBook guides you through using VoiceThread to fostering student learning in a peer-to-peer environment with clearly communicated learning objectives and your formative feedback (discussed in chapter 4) delivered with the warmth and nuance of your voice. This model will demonstrate both scaffolding and flow.

VoiceThread, of course, can (and should) be paired with other assessment methods (blogging, traditional quizzes, essays, etc.). By varying your learning environment and providing feedback to your students in multiple ways (automatic grading in a course management quiz and personalized video comments in a VoiceThread) students will feel supported in an array of ways and feel more encouraged and motivated to persist. I blend VoiceThread with weekly blog posts and periodic traditional assessments in an LMS with built-in feedback.

Blending VoiceThread into your teaching toolkit allows you to fine tune areas of your course design as it matures. Your students will become empowered as they begin to understand how they learn. They will be able to identify what they need to do to improve their mastery of the content and they will have a continuous digital trail of breadcrumbs to look back on and review their learning progress over time. This chapter will present a model for scaffolding VoiceThread into your class that will take your students through the process of growing into mindful users of digital media (Rheingold, 2012) and content creators.

Promoting Deeper Learning
You may already be familiar with Figure 2.1 which illustrates the seven levels of the cognitive domain of Bloom’s taxonomy, revised by Anderson in the 1990s. In short, the visual describes the process through which an individual develops knowledge and intellectual skills and few college professors would disagree that these are critical skills for students to master. The arrow that runs along the left side of the pyramid, moving from the bottom to the top, communicates a fundamental message about how these skills must be acquired. According to Bloom’s taxonomy, mastering the higher order knowledge and intellectual skills (analyzing, evaluating, and creating) is only possible if a learner first masters the lower order skills (remembering, understanding, and applying). Therefore, the lower order thinking skills are pre-requisites to the higher order cognitive skills; they function to scaffold one’s ability to think critically and perform at the most proficient levels of intellectual abilities.

Bloom’s cognitive domain of learning is a helpful visual when designing a plan to integrate VoiceThread into your online class for a couple of reasons. First, it helps us to map activities with learning objectives. Spend time evaluating how each level of the domain aligns with your course’s learning objectives.

- How and when do you assess these levels now? Or do you?
- How do you know if your students are making progress through these levels?
- How do your students know if they are making progress through these levels?
- What areas do students have the most trouble with in your class?
- What strategies/activities can you incorporate to support students through these challenging areas of growth?

If your goal is to improve your existing class, focusing on problem areas can be great places to pinpoint where you should begin to integrate VoiceThread into your class! You can leverage those learning speed
bumps as target areas to implement individualized learning supports for students using a VoiceThread activity (and requiring them all to complete it). VoiceThread's unique learning environment creates opportunities for students to comment individually and demonstrate their knowledge (as specified in the activity’s instructions by the instructor) and learn from the comments of their peers and the feedback left by their instructor. The environment is a beautiful learning space for guiding students towards the mastery of a skill.

**Example: Scaffolding with VoiceThread in a flipped classroom**

Here is an example of how I integrated VoiceThread to improve my students’ higher order thinking skills. In the Spring of 2009, I used VoiceThread to flip my (face-to-face) History of Women in Art class. At the time, I had been teaching this class online for about two years and I had all of the lectures developed as enhanced podcasts (audio with still images) and also available in illustrated PDFs. My primary interest for flipping my classroom was to transform my students’ learning spent in the classroom from a passive to an active learning experience. This required me to shift my paradigm and rethink what my role would be, as well as entirely transform my instructional design model.

So I decided I was not going to spend class time lecturing, which was my traditional teaching method for my face-to-face classes. Yes, I did small group discussions and I had a rather Socratic teaching style, in general. But, really, I was clinging mostly to lecture and I knew this because around week twelve I could feel the itch to “hurry up and get through more content” because I could sense the impending end of the term. I did not like that inner dialogue and I knew it wasn’t best for my students’ learning.

As I reflect, I know now that my perspective had transformed but my practice had not. It is much more difficult for faculty members to transform their practice than it is to transform their perspective. Altering practice is a harrowing process. It requires us become very vulnerable, which is not easy to do as professors. Yet, as Brene Brown attests, "Vulnerability is the origin of creativity and innovation."

At the beginning, I knew two things for sure: that I would have my students listen to or read the lectures before coming to class (as this content was already developed and part of my online class) and that I would use the same summative assessments from the previous term: a midterm and final that included a written visual analysis essay in which students compared and contrasted two art historical works of art, short answer, and matching/multiple choice questions.

What I did not know was how I would ensure that my students would actually complete the lectures. I realized this was a huge factor that needed to be addressed, as I knew if students didn't complete the lectures before coming to class the in-class activities would fall flat on their face and the entire active learning focus would be a failure.

I also knew that I wanted to improve the quality of the written visual analysis essays on the midterm and final exams. These are the summative assessments that measure a student’s mastery of higher order thinking skills. How would I achieve these goals?

The plan I developed involved the use of VoiceThread as a formative assessment tool. Prior to this teaching approach, formative assessments did not have a role in my classroom so my students sat, passively as learners and acquired knowledge for most of the class – or at least I assumed they did!
Outside of class they created what I referred to as “image journals” in which they assembled images and ideas about those images discussed in class and submitted those for points throughout the term. This was a great learning activity and students, in general, benefited from it when they did it regularly (which was the challenge). I needed to integrate steady, regular scaffolding that would support individualized learning throughout the class to build students towards a mastery of visual analysis skills on which they would be assessed on exam day and stimulate flow. VoiceThread could act as a bridge to connect student learning between class and home, creating an inclusive participation environment for students to share, reflect, and demonstrate their knowledge in a learning community. My theory was that the use of VoiceThread would support students leveling up their skills from class period to class period.

So I created an instructional plan that looked like this:

![Figure 2.2 Flipped Classroom Design](image)

Essentially, after students completed the lecture for a unit, they were required to access what I referred to as a “pre-class” VoiceThread. In that activity, they were presented with a series of slides from which they selected (usually) two and left one comment on their two slides of choice. Their comment was required to fulfill the prompt on the screen and they were expected to listen to other comments first to ensure their comment did not repeat the contributions of other students who commented before them. The prompts were aligned directly with the learning objectives for the unit which were also aligned with the lecture. Effectively tying all the unit’s content back to clear, measurable learning objectives keeps the relevance of activities clear and helps your students be more aware of your expectations. The prompts, moreover, are different from “discussion prompts,” as they were not intended to stimulate back-and-forth dialogue between the students. Rather, the pre-class VoiceThreads were my opportunity to ensure students had a foundational understanding of the ideas from the lecture.

Click here to view a sample of an excerpt of a student voice comment from a pre-class formative.
assessment.

These formative assessments proved to be very helpful in scaffolding my students’ learning for a couple of reasons. First, it provided the scaffolding necessary to ensure they completed their lectures, which was a criteria for using class time actively and to further develop students' visual analysis skills through small group work. If students did not develop the foundational cognitive skills (remembering, understanding) from the lecture then we could not move on to “applying” the skills to the paintings and sculptures from the particular time period covered in each learning unit during our class time. Secondly, freed from lecture preparation, I took the 45 minutes prior to the start of each class to review the pre-class VoiceThread. In a notebook, I would take notes about each slide. For example:

- Slide 1:
  - excellent comments: Susan, Jamie, Scott;
  - clarification needed from: Jill;
  - overall, good demonstration of mastery from students

I would continue these notes for each slide until I had an overview of my assessment of the VoiceThread. Then when I entered class, I would project the VoiceThread on a screen in front of class and use it as the catalyst to jump into the discussion. I could start off with my overall assessment of how the students were grasping the main ideas from the lecture and go from slide by slide to point out students who made excellent contributions. If a comment was especially compelling, I would play it (that is, if it was a voice or video comment -- the text comments are too difficult for students to read on a projected screen, but I could read a text comment out loud to them). This directly ties the activities into the class, demonstrating their relevance to the students and also motivating them to make meaningful contributions. If there was a comment that I felt had a good idea buried in it but I couldn’t quite understand it, I would ask for clarification but I was always sensitive to not call on students who did not understand material. The point was not to embarrass them, it was to foster learning in a supportive context, as well as to become more familiar with my students' diverse learning levels.

The second type of VoiceThread activities I integrated into the flipped classroom course design were “post-class” VoiceThreads. They were slides that I set up to build upon our classroom discussions. We generally spent two class periods on each unit. By the second class period, we moved into image comparison discussions. I would project pairs of images and we would start the semester discussing their similarities and differences as a group. At first I would take the lead in these discussions and model how to visually analyze the paintings, pointing out how they are similar and different while applying historical ideas, events, and significant topics from our units. Then I began to step out of the process more and more and students worked in small groups during class to develop lists of the similarities and differences between the paintings. And then after the class was over the students would enter the “post-class” VoiceThread where they each would have an opportunity to analyze images (single or comparisons) and practice their visual analysis skills on their own. They were encouraged to use notes from class for these activities and to also build upon the class discussions, sharing additional ideas that blossomed through reflection after class had ended.

Click here to view a sample of a student voice comment from a post-class VoiceThread.
How formative assessments improve learning
Let’s take a step back and analyze how the post-class VoiceThreads function to scaffold student learning. As I reflected earlier, I had an interest in improving my students’ higher order learning skills and my attempt to integrate formative assessments that would provide students with support systems to give students ample opportunities to work through the visual analysis process individually with guided support from their instructor and their peers (in small group discussion activities). The “post-class” VoiceThread activities remove some of the scaffolding, giving students the chance to leave their own comment but they are still learning in a participatory space and may glean ideas from peers’ comments by building off their ideas, for example.

Finally, the most unexpected value of the pre-class and post-class formative assessment VoiceThreads used in my flipped classroom model was how much students leveraged them to help prepare for the summative exams. Students said listening to and reading the comments was like being in class all over again. This was a benefit I had not expected.
The class to me, established a strong community and many students shared evidence of deep learning in the open-ended comments of the final semester survey. Eighty one percent of students strongly agreed or agreed that VoiceThread increased their sense of community when they were in class. This increased connectedness to peers is an important correlation with increasing the rate of deep learning in larger classes (the max class size was 40). When students learn together “in community,” as the VoiceThread environment provides for, deeper relationships are fostered and students are more likely to share connections between content in class and real-world experiences leading to deep learning. When deep learning occurs, a student’s motivation and engagement increases, as they become intrinsically driven to learn which stimulates flow.

Here are a few student comments that I perceive as evidence of flow and deep learning:

• “[The class] made me look at the images I see every day in a new way. I also liked the way that the class was set up. I think more classes should be this way.”

• “The material in this class prompted me to evaluate my experiences as a female in terms of my connection to females who have lived before me, females now, and those who will soon arrive on the scene.”

• “I have to admit it did take a little getting used to and did require you to become more organized, BUT the richness in the information was an incredible trade of. I feel as though I walked through the 1920’s in Paris and was able to breathe in the atmosphere...”

Click here to listen to a 20-minute interview between me and three of my students at the end of my flipped classroom experiment. They will reflect on how VoiceThread affected their learning, in addition to other elements of the class.

Student survey comments also noted themes about how the VoiceThreads offered students more access to diverse perspectives on topics covered in class than a traditional lecture class would and increased opportunities for students who feel shy interacting in a class setting. This last point was something I began to notice throughout the semester with one particular student who participated actively in small group discussions but did not say much at all in our large group conversations. In the VoiceThreads, however, her comments were deeply insightful and thought provoking.

• “I liked the voicethreads the best because they helped make me think in other ways and get different perspectives from my fellow students.”

• “...this class created an environment for people to do well who don’t always do best in a classroom environment if they’re afraid to talk in class or if the class is run by a group of students who dominate the conversation.”

Finally, the survey revealed that 100% of the students that responded (the survey had a 77% response rate) strongly agreed or agreed that the variety of the learning materials played a role in helping them to meet the learning objectives. Eight one percent of the students strongly agreed or agreed that the class helped them to understand how they learn best, arguably a critical skill in a society that empowers individuals to live on a path of lifelong learning.
Cultivating content creators

Our digital, mobile society is rich with content. On the one hand, it may seem nonsensical to want to encourage our students to create more digital content when we’re already drowning in a sea of irrelevant funny cat videos. Or we could argue this is all the more reason to demonstrate the power of digital content to showcase a learner’s skills and abilities.

When new college graduates enter the workforce today, they find themselves in an entirely different job search paradigm than most educators can probably relate to. More corporate recruiters and hiring managers each year are doing away with traditional job boards and actively scouring social media sites like LinkedIn and Twitter to identify candidates with digital footprints that validate their skills and connections. These “personal learning networks” offer ways to demonstrate a candidate’s subject matter expertise -- if 1,500 people around the world follow your Tweets about nutrition and your blog about healthy eating receives 10,000 page views a month and the next candidate has no digital footprint at all, well, that social media activity just might pay off!

You might ask, how can a “new grad” compete in such a marketplace? Well, I would respond, “That’s where you come in.” In K-12, the Common Core standards are ushering in new expectations for students to demonstrate higher levels of cognition and the creation of multimedia projects will continue to be explored by teachers as assessment options for these standards. As K-12 students continue to become more proficient in using technology and creating their own digital content, these expectations will be carried on into college and these are important conditions that will continuously impact the levels of engagement in our college learners. Creating digital media is not only a compelling method of assessing student learning, it is also part of our students’ culture.

In my online college class, I make sure that each of my students authors a digital artifact. This way, when they leave the class they have an authentic digital object they can share and use to represent as their own authentic work in the digital space – on a blog, social network site, ePortfolio, or website. These types of digital artifacts are becoming more and more essential to professional success each and every day.

In my class, the digital artifact that my students produce is a VoiceThread. Creating a VoiceThread is an advanced skill that my students build up to throughout our course. The VoiceThread assignments prior to their capstone project create a scaffolded learning experience that allows them to acquire the skills needed to using VoiceThread and communicate clearly in asynchronous voice comments (which is not an innate
skill). Each skill acquired in the class builds upon the previous one, which reduces students’ anxieties about learning how to use the technology and allows them to focus more on their learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Level</th>
<th>Scaffolded VoiceThread Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginner</td>
<td>Commenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Commenting &amp; Editing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Commenting, Editing &amp; Creating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.4 Varying Skill Levels Of VoiceThread Users And Suggested Activities For Each*

In the flipped classroom example shared above, students never left the “beginning” stage of VoiceThreading. Clearly, commenting alone yields significant cognitive advantages and if you do not feel “ready” for leaving that stage, then don’t. You are the leader in your class and being confident about taking your students into a new territory is important. But, with that said, don’t expect to ever feel totally confident (at least I don’t!) because experimentation and innovation always involves unknowns. You should feel confident with the technology, while remaining open to reading and evaluating the success of your new approach based upon the students’ work and feedback they provide.

Granting students “Edit” permission to a VoiceThread marks the “intermediate” level use of VoiceThread. This means students have the typical “view” and “comment” privileges but they also have the ability to upload media into the VoiceThread.

To begin this type of activity, the instructor creates a VoiceThread (with a clear learning objective and instructions). This VoiceThread is then shared with a Group that all members of your class have joined (this is something my students do in week one). Sharing a VoiceThread with a Group automatically gives the members of that group “view” and “commenting” access. So you must add one more level of access which is “edit” access. To do this, return to the Share step (click the gear icon and select Share), select the Group name, and then select the “pencil” icon next to the name of each user in your group. When the pencil icon is lit, that group member has been granted edit access to the VoiceThread.

I find that it’s best to be very specific in your instructions for the activities that involve editing. Clear, specific, accessible instructions (text and video or illustrate with screenshots, for example) will reduce the number of student questions you receive and increase the quality of your students’ contributions.

Editing activities generally have many steps that students must complete prior to the point of editing the VoiceThread. For example, in my class each student would have identified their topic of choice, done their research according to my instructions, prepared the content for their comments, and located online images for their slides. Editing the VoiceThread step is merely a process of assembling the content they have already curated. For this reason, I share the most of the instructions for the editing activities in the Learning Management System (LMS), rather than in the VoiceThread, because by the time my students
open the VoiceThread they should have completed most of their work completed. The instructions that are shared on slides within in the VoiceThread only include the work that needs to be done in the VoiceThread.

An example of a student-edited VoiceThread activity
One editable VoiceThread activity I use in my online History of Photography Class is titled Visual Thinking. It is a multi-layered activity that is divided into two parts. Students complete part one in week 12 of the class and part two in week 13. I give the students separate instructions for each part of the project, which helps to reduce their feelings of being overwhelmed. The main objective of part one is to have students work together to curate a comprehensive learning unit about mid-20th century photographers through the process of evaluating, selecting, arranging, and presenting digital media. Pedagogically, I am flipping the dichotomy of the professor delivering verified content for students to consume and, in contrast, having students be responsible for evaluating, selecting, arranging, and presenting content for the class. In doing so, they also build upon their beginning VoiceThread skills and set themselves on the pathway to becoming content creators by fostering their intermediate VoiceThreading skills. For this type of activity, a VoiceThread becomes like a wiki.

Part 1: Visual Thinking

1.1 Claim your photographer
To begin this activity, I created a vetted list of 20th century photographers that are featured in the textbook that the students use in the class. This ensures students stay on track with the course curriculum but also provides them with a choice about which photographer's work they will examine. I share this list in an editable Google Doc with my students in part one. The link is simply shared in my LMS; students click on it, the document opens in a new window, they view the list. At this point, the students take time to decide which photographer they want to learn more about and they "claim" that photographer typing their name next to any unclaimed photographer on the list. Since it's a collaborative document, I do nothing other than check in a couple of times during this week to ensure the sign-ups are progressing.

1.2 Research your photographer
Then students need to research the photographer and come up with their own critical response to the question, “Why is this photographer remembered today?” The response to this question, however, will be justified by their research and they will also apply the ideas in an analysis of one photograph by the photographer (hand selected by students in the next step of part one). To do their research, they are taught how to search Google Books. This learning experience introduces students to valid scholarly content that is openly available on the web. They are required to cite their sources in a text comment in proper citation format.

1.3 Locate and select two online photographs by the photographer
Next students search for and select two images taken by the photographer that represent his or her accomplishments. The students perform a Google Image search using key terms to locate the images. My intent is to familiarize students with how to search for and evaluate digital media in our content-inundated society. Students, for example, are taught how to evaluate search results to determine which images are more likely to have been made by their photographer and how to sort images by size. This process also requires students to make stylistic decisions as they select only two images for inclusion in the VoiceThread. Next, they isolate the image URL (which ends in .jpg) and bookmark it for use in the VoiceThread. These two images will be the media files each student uploads into the VoiceThread.

1.4 Prepare presentation content in writing
Now that the students have two images selected, they prepare a 500-word mini-presentation that justifies why the photographer is remembered today. This presentation will be recorded in the VoiceThread but is composed offline, using the students' research notes.

The second element of the presentation content is the open-ended discussion prompt that is spoken as a voice or video comment on the second image (after it is uploaded into VoiceThread). This too is composed outside of VoiceThread.

To ensure students are crystal clear about what I expect of them, I model my expectations by signing up for a photographer on the "claim your photographer" document and creating two "sample sample slides" that are visible to students at the beginning of the VoiceThread "Shell" (the word I use to describe the editable VoiceThread before any student edits are made). By playing my sample slides, students can view precisely what quality of content I expect of them.

Click here to view the "Shell" of the editable VoiceThread activity, “Visual Thinking.”

1.5 Upload content & record comments in the VoiceThread "Shell"
Throughout the week-long learning unit, students asynchronously upload their media and add their comments before the due date.
Part 2: Visual Thinking

The activity continues the next week when students re-engage with the now fully populated VoiceThread (see images 2.4 and 2.5 to compare the "Shell" at the start of part one and at the start of part two). The
VoiceThread has transformed from an empty shell to a dynamic presentation full of diverse perspectives and open-ended questions. More importantly, the content is driven by the students' choices -- not mine -- making this a truly student-centered activity.

In part two of the activity, each student is assigned the task of learning about two additional photographers of their choice (they are not permitted to select the photographer they contributed!). After selecting the two photographers in the VoiceThread they want to learn more about, they listen to Slide 1 (the mini-presentation) to learn about the photographer and then respond to the discussion prompt on Slide 2. Finally, I have them leave a comment on a slide at the end of the VoiceThread titled "Reflections" where they comment about how taking this approach to learning affected their learning. This metacognitive layer encourages the students to pause and reflect on how this process of learning affected how they learned. The comments are quite enlightening!

[Click here to listen to a sample of the "Reflections" slide from "Visual Thinking."]

Instructor Reflections About Visual Thinking

One of my big takeaways from this activity is the diversity that shines through in the content selection and sharing. For example, one of my students, a very soft spoken male, chose to learn about Minor White. When he presented White's work he selected an image for his discussion slide that was not a typical image representative of White's oeuvre. White is typically known for abstract black-and-white photographs. But the student chose one of White's photographs of the male body. In his comment, he spoke of White's major accomplishments but also noted how White struggled as a homosexual in mainstream heterosexual society, which was a particularly compelling experience as the photographer returned to the United States from World War II. The student shared the photograph on the screen and asked students to ponder how differently White would be remembered today if his photographs of the male body had been shown, rather than kept hidden away as they had been.

This example affects me deeply as a teacher because I realize how the design of the activity empowered this learner to examine the aspect of Minor White's experiences that were meaningful and relevant to him and to raise these in a discussion with his peers. By allowing students to choose the photographer they want to learn about and the images they find compelling, rather than having me decide which photographers and which images the class would focus on (that's how I learned art history!), a fresh approach to an iconic photographer unfolded here. It is worth noting that I do not believe this type of intimate, vulnerable conversation would surface early in a class. The bonding of the class community prior to the activity was an important part of its success. This further stresses the importance of integrating editing activities later in the term.

The one risk instructors need to be aware of here is that students with edit access to a VoiceThread do have the ability to delete slides. This has not been an issue for me at all. I have had issues with content being deleted from editable Google Drive Presentations because there is no warning before content
disappears (but it can also be retrieved through the history). In VoiceThread, users get clear, distinct warnings signaling that content will be deleted if they proceed.

When considering editable activities like this one, sometimes instructors cite concerns about students maliciously deleting content. While this is certainly possible, I believe that including editing as an activity later in the class, after trust is established, reduces the likelihood of these problems. Also, deleting content from a VoiceThread requires a user to understand how to use VoiceThread. This further reduces the likelihood that students who have not been active participants in the class are going to be maliciously undermining your activities. Chances are they would not understand how to delete a slide!

From my experiences, I find that integrating editable VoiceThread activities into a class at the mid-point of the term is an excellent way to increase a student's accountability. When students are held responsible for creating content from which their peers will learn, they are more likely to put more effort into their work.

Click here to view a 1-hour webinar of my Visual Thinking activity including student excerpts.

Students as VoiceThread Creators

As I mentioned earlier, the final project in my online class requires each student to create his or her own VoiceThread. I will explain this activity in detail in this section. But first, let’s ponder the learning benefits that creating a VoiceThread can bring to the student experience and the multiple assessment pathways it opens for you.

Creating a VoiceThread places a student in the seat of a curator of digital media and a creator of digital content. Curation is the process of evaluating and selecting objects for inclusion based upon specific criteria. Museums hire curators to make decisions about which paintings, sculptures, prints, etc. will and won't be included in art exhibitions. Evaluating, as you know, is a higher order thinking skill, taking its place in Bloom's taxonomy just below creating. Creating a VoiceThread requires students to assemble their selected media (which may be online media they search for, evaluate, and validate or media they create); arrange these media files in a logical sequence; and narrate comments that demonstrate effective application, understanding, and remembering of information made visible on the slides. Creating a VoiceThread can be a powerful, authentic learning assessment, as well as a relevant artifact for students to share in digital portfolios after the class has ended.

Students can create VoiceThreads to meet an endless array of objectives:

1. Interview subject matter experts to evaluate contemporary problems facing particular professions or disciplines.

2. Debate another student to demonstrate one's ability to argue persuasively.
3. Present stories of one's family heritage using family photographs to synthesize real world stories with historical events.

4. Collect viewpoints from community members about a topic using the mobile app and then reflect on these viewpoints in one's own video comment to evaluate perspectives for bias.

5. Create a multi-media ad using a self-made video and comments from the public to demonstrate knowledge of and solutions for improving a social cause.

6. Upload a series of photographs and narrate them in foreign language creating a fictitious story to demonstrate mastery of that language.

7. Working with a small group of students in an editable VoiceThread, create a business plan for a fictitious company and present it to the class with presentation slides and images.

8. Give students a collection of images that illustrate key devices, products, medical instruments, biological specimens, historical figures, artworks, etc. (all visuals they've seen in your past learning units) and give them a week to select five of them. Their task is to upload these images into a VoiceThread in sequence of their historical emergence and create an audio narration that analyzes how the objects/figures/events illustrated influenced future generations.

An example of a student-created VoiceThread project

Mindful use of digital media, according to Rheingold (2012), implies an ability to filter out invalid content (what Rheingold refers to as "crap detection") and contribute to participatory culture. For the capstone project in my History of Photography class, my students are required to create a VoiceThread about the work of an active contemporary photographer. It is referred to as the "Photographer Showcase" project. I hope it fosters mindful use of digital media, along with the rest of the experiences in my online that I have described throughout the rest of the eBook.

The "Photographer Showcase" project provides students with many exceptional real-world learning experiences that exceed what students learn from reading a book or watching a video. It also further hones their VoiceThreading skills to the advanced level and demonstrates their ability to evaluate web-based information, participate in the open web by interacting with a real person, and collaborating effectively with the photographer to determine how to appropriately attribute and share his/her work in the VoiceThread. This final skill is folded into developing important digital literacy skills in students, which demonstrate the importance of being what Rheingold refers to as “mindful users” of digital media.

To start, the students are provided with a link to a website that I have developed. The site is accessible outside of our LMS, making it easier for students to bookmark and visit frequently. The site includes a welcome video from me providing a general overview about the project, a “Questions” page with a
VoiceThread embedded on it in which they may ask questions they have about the project, sample projects from previous students, and three pages that clearly chunk the project out into three steps. Each page (Step 1, Step 2, Step 3) includes an overview of the milestone or deliverable the student must provide to successfully complete the step and the due date for that step. Five points are earned for completing step one and step two (for a total of ten points). As students earn these points, they are automatically counted towards the total value of the project (75 points) so they begin to see their work tangibly resulting in progress towards their grade. This is a built-in incentive to prevent students from procrastinating. These points cannot be made-up, but I do consider individual situations. I provide extensions for step one or two when students contact me with challenges. The point is not to be difficult. The point is to keep students working towards their goals and to ensure they maintain contact with me.

**Step 1: Identify & Contact 3 Photographers**

In Step 1, students are given one week to research photographers and find three that have produced photographic work that is visually intriguing to the student and has exhibited in at least two gallery or museum exhibitions. These final elements are usually discernable through an examination of a photographer’s online C.V. To complete this step, the student must contact three photographers and ask if they would be available to participate in an interview for the student’s class project. Students may contact local photographers in their community or they may contact photographers located on the other side of the world. The choice is theirs. The students must submit the name and website of the three photographers they contacted to me through an online Google Form by the due date for Step 1.

**Step 2: Interview a Photographer**

To move on to Step 2, the students must have secured a “yes” from one photographer and have confirmed an interview with him or her. This is one of the interesting ‘real world’ learning experiences about this project. Many students receive “yes” responses the next day, some within a week, and some do not hear back at all from the photographers they contacted and need to contact additional photographers. This ebb and flow of the project is just like real-world work. And, no, it’s not fair. That’s a key point for students to understand. If students just stop and say, “Oh well, nobody got back to me. I guess I can’t do it,” then they do not progress on to Step 2 and they do not succeed with this project. That is real world learning.

Step 2 requires each student to interview his or her photographer. They may do this however they wish -- via phone, email, setting up a VoiceThread, on Skype, or in person. It is entirely up to the student and the photographer to make these arrangements. I provide criteria that must be included in the interview, as well as deeper ideas they may want to dig for. In the interview process, they also must obtain permission to share at least six of the photographer’s images in the VoiceThread.

The students must request permission to share the VoiceThread in one of the following ways: publicly, semi-privately (with anyone who has the link) or privately with just our class members. This decision is left up to the photographer and will guide how the VoiceThread will be shared by the student. Finally, the students must negotiate a decision about how the photographs will be attributed in the VoiceThread and this attribution must be included in the final VoiceThread as a condition of the project. To complete step 2, an interview template with their notes, an explanation about how the VoiceThread will be shared, and the attribution format for the photographs must be submitted to me by the due date.

**Step 3: Create and Share a VoiceThread “Showcase”**

Step 3 involves the final production of the VoiceThread. The students curate the images (at least six of
them) into a meaningful arrangement and add their narration. They have specific criteria to meet including providing a biographical overview of the person, an explanation of the cameras used, ideas explored in the photographer’s work, photographers who have inspired the artist, and a detailed and critical visual analysis of the student’s favorite photograph.

I require students to produce their Photographer Showcase projects using voice or video comments so they are also demonstrating their verbal presentation skills, in addition to the digital literacy skills noted earlier. More traditionally, the project is tied directly to the course’s learning objectives in many ways too. Through interacting with a practicing photographer, students gain real-world insights about the practices of photographers exploring visual expression as an art form. In their projects, they often cite influences of photographers we have learned about in class and identify historical processes that are still being used by contemporary photographers. When the students are finished with their VoiceThreads, they simply share them with the VoiceThread group I have established for the project.

Step 4: Showcase Analysis
The learning is further enhanced the week after the students share their VoiceThreads. That week the students engage in reviewing each others’ VoiceThreads by clicking on the group and previewing the work of their peers. Each student is required to select two of their peers' VoiceThreads to analyze and leave two "meaningful" comments in each of those VoiceThreads.

Finally, students write a reflection post about the entire project on their blog (which we use for writing activities in our class). In the reflection, they share what their biggest takeaways were from the project. They also compare what they learned through their own experiences with their photographer with the experiences they had reviewing the two VoiceThreads of their peers.

Reflection is critical in fostering mindful learners, especially in today’s society where things move continuously at lightning fast speed. This chapter has offered two examples of how my students' learning involves the process of thinking about how they’ve learned. This is an example of what’s formally referred to as metacognition. The Visual Thinking activity, as you recall, included a “Final Reflections” slide for students to compare how the collaborative VoiceThread activity affected their learning in comparison to traditional courses where content may be pre-curated by a professor for students to read and then talk about. The Photographer Showcase project is followed by a “Reflections” blog post in which students reflect on their own experiences overall with the project and then compare what they learned from their photographer with what they learned from the VoiceThreads of their peers.

Instructor Reflections about the "Photographer Showcase"

As I reflect on this activity, I see it as one that I am still grooming. By far, it is the most complex and most challenging activity to facilitate effectively. Chunking up the steps and including a clear deliverable with a due date for each step was a significant improvement, as it keeps students focused on one segment of the project at a time. Universal Design for Learning stresses the importance of “providing options for executive functions.” Examples of this include the incorporation of “cognitive ‘speed bumps’ that prompt them to ‘stop and think;’ graduated scaffolds that help them actually implement strategies; or engagement in decision-making with competent mentors.” I believe the chunking of the activities meets this objective. So far, I have only had one student who did not complete the project and in his own reflections he shared it was due to his procrastination, which prevented him from keeping up with the project’s timeline.
Another scaffold I integrated to support the students’ success was making myself available in an optional Google+ Hangout for four of the weeks leading up to the project’s due date. The first semester I offered this, I had a total of four students attend the Hangouts, overall. Another student Skyped me several times and no students left comments in the VoiceThread. I also received a few inquiries through email from students. Providing students with asynchronous and synchronous opportunities to connect, share, and ask questions during a complex project is important.

I also reflect deeply on how incredibly nervous students are about reaching out and contacting “a real photographer.” And I contrast these initial perceptions with the pride they convey when their project is done. Many students note how surprised they were to learn that a “real photographer” would actually want to talk to a student. Empowering learners to use technology to break through these perceptions sets them up to be more self-confident, prepared, and self-directed facilitators of their life plans. In a world where anyone can publish their own book, organize a social activist movement, or invent the next great idea that might transform life as we know it, college learning must involve taking risks.

I also see great potential in VoiceThread for inviting the voices of experts directly into the students’ projects, opening new ways to foster global participation and collaboration skills. I have not made this a requirement for my project, as it creates a host of challenges when students are working with photographers in a virtual situation. Interviewing a stranger is one thing but requiring my students to be able to get another person to leave comments in a VoiceThread is too much (in my opinion). Yet, I encourage students to try and many do! Sometimes they have success and sometimes they don’t -- another real world learning experience.

Click here to view an excerpt from a Photographer Showcase featuring a comment from a photographer.

As I close my reflections, I want to share two stories from the Photographer Showcase project that, to me, demonstrate the benefits of authentic assessments. One of my students, named Diane, created her VoiceThread and submitted it along with the rest of the class. She also sent the link to the photographer. He viewed it and wrote back with a favorable comment. Then a few weeks went by. He wrote back to her again and said that the VoiceThread she had created had “validated his career.” Photographers can go their entire life without ever having a sense of how their work touches another person. Diane’s project did more than fulfill learning objectives for a college class. She changed a life. And that is something she (nor I) will ever forget. Quite an outcome for a college class!

My second story is about a student named Debra. Debra took the initiative to create a VoiceThread about a photographer living in England named Paul Biddle. She was inspired by his images and really wanted to learn more about him. Debra produced a fabulous VoiceThread that met all the criteria I asked for in the class. But her greatest reward was how Paul received the project. He was so thrilled with the presentation that he asked her permission to share it on his blog. She said yes, with a proud smile.
Chapter 2 Take Aways

1. Scaffolding provides individualized learning supports for students to enable them to develop higher levels of cognitive growth throughout a class.

2. VoiceThread’s asynchronous social learning environment places a student in a context in which s/he may learn from his instructor and peers, while practicing and improving his skills.

3. Using VoiceThread as an online formative assessment tool is an effective way to increase deep learning.

4. To transform your students into curators and creators of content, blend the use of VoiceThread into your class in steps: 1) beginning: commenting, 2) intermediate: editing, commenting, 3) advanced: creating

5. Creating a VoiceThread is an authentic assessment strategy that will provide your students with a digital artifact and opportunities to make meaningful imprints on the world through the mindful use of digital media.
Chapter 3: The 8 Elements of an Effectively Designed VoiceThread

VoiceThread resources for this chapter:

- VoiceThread Guides
- Creating
- Groups and Sharing
- Creating & Using Groups Guide
- Doodling
- VoiceThread Universal
- VoiceThread Mobile

When you begin to design VoiceThread activities for your learners, there are many key factors that will promote their success. We have already touched upon several critical foundational elements including aligning the activity with learning objectives, preparing the media files that you will upload, implementing strategies for maximizing human presence, supporting the principles of Universal Design for Learning and accessibility, as well as scaffolding learning.

This chapter focuses on developing a clear instructional design for your VoiceThread activities to promote consistency in your students’ experiences and empower them to be more self-directed learners. The strategies shared here will ensure students understand what you expect of them, increase the quality of their contributions, and reduce the number of questions you receive.

Building a solid framework

Lucid expectations are essential to successful, student-centered online learning activities. Many instructors fail to realize that there are an array of factors that can contribute to a student completing an assignment unsatisfactorily. For example, students in fully online classes learn in physical isolation from their peers and their instructor. As we discussed in chapter one, this isolation can create social challenges for learners if the course is not designed to foster social presence. Also, help may not be readily available the moment it is needed, as in a face-to-face classroom; although, one could argue that savvy online learners are connected to a world of resources and help today that face-to-face learners do not have at their disposal!

Moreover, an online class is comprised of groups of students that vary in their academic, motivation, and technological levels, and this shifts based upon the level of your course and the type of institution at which you teach. But cultural or socio economic factors play a role here too. Some students feel intimidated to reach out and ask for help out of fear of feeling stupid. Some students need instructions
repeated in multiple ways for complex ideas to make sense. Strive to remedy this by creating clear instructions shared in voice and text and in a format that is easy to reference so students know where to look for information. Taking the guesswork out of your students’ learning will set them up for success.

What you decide to include in the “instructional design framework” for your VoiceThreads is up to you. What I recommend is that you make some decisions about key slide topics that you will repeat in all of your VoiceThreads -- again, our goal here is consistency. Obviously, some of the content on the slides will change with each VoiceThread but there may be slides that stay the same. What slide topics should you include? How does this work? Let’s take a look!

Click here to view a 4-minute video tour of my suggested instructional design framework for a VoiceThread activity.

Consistency is at the core of a student-centered design. As you design your VoiceThread slides, leave out specific dates and other information that will change each term. Create your slides with the intention to re-use them. Dates and other content that will change frequently should be placed in the LMS where it can be easily updated. This will save you time and reduce the amount of errors your students will find in your re-used content. Remember, each time you create a new VoiceThread, you have the option upload existing slides from your previous VoiceThreads using the upload from media sources feature.

In the next section, we will discuss the:

8 Elements of an Effectively Designed VoiceThread

1. Title Slide
2. Overview Slide
3. Instructions Slide
4. Tips for VoiceThread Slide
5. Grading Criteria Slide
6. Ground Rules or Norms Slide
7. Commenting Slides
8. Check-In Slide

1. Title slide
Creating a consistent design (color, fonts, etc.) for the Title Slide for VoiceThreads will make them easy for students to use, reference, and learn from throughout your class. This idea is crystallized through Figure 3.1 which shows you a student’s view of my VoiceThread class Group. When I teach with
VoiceThread, I share each VoiceThread with the Group and it is made available to students in my LMS through the Blackboard integration feature. If you are teaching without an LMS integration of VoiceThread, you have the option to manually embed your VoiceThreads in your LMS.

This enables students to participate in the VoiceThread directly from the LMS, via the VoiceThread mobile, and they also have direct access to all the VoiceThreads from their MyVoice page at any time in the class. This final option creates a beautiful learning flow for students who wish to leverage the VoiceThreads as resources to help them prepare for quizzes or tests (rather than needing to dig into separate learning units in an LMS).

As you look at Figure 3.1, you can see that only the first slide in a VoiceThread is visible to students as the view the contents of the Group.

![VoiceThread interface](image)

**Figure 3.1 View of VoiceThreads from the Group level.**

_A few key tips to consider for your title slide are:_

- Include the name of the activity.
- Use effective color contrast between the background and font colors.
- Use a similar color scheme throughout all your VoiceThread activities.
- Avoid laying text over images.
- If you include an image, make it simple and balance it with your text.
Don’t forget your friendly video comment to welcome your students (and alternate text version comment to make it 508-compliant)!

Use the “Title” field in VoiceThread to add an alt-tag for an image on your slide. The alt-tag will be read by a screen reader in VoiceThread Universal.

2. Overview slide

What is the concept or focus of this VoiceThread? This slide provides a bird’s eye view of the activity and you should keep in mind that it might be viewed by students as they are learning within the flow of a learning unit or several weeks after a unit has ended. The fixed nature of a VoiceThread makes it a perfect learning resource to be utilized again and again by students who need extra support. Here are a few considerations:

- This is a great place to communicate learning objectives that are aligned with the activity.
- Point out how the activity ties back to a previous unit and fits in with where the students are headed in future units.
- Is there something out of the ordinary about this activity that you should alert your students to? For example, is it the first time they will be editing a VoiceThread? Or are you using the VoiceThread to deliver content rather than requiring students to participate, as you usually do? These are important distinctions to communicate to your students, as they will have general expectations set based upon their previous experiences with using VoiceThread in your class (and other classes).

I design my slides with accessibility in mind. When I create my original media in Keynote (my preferred presentation tool), I type a very basic script on the slide. Therefore, when the slide is loaded into VoiceThread (after it is converted to a PDF!) and I leave my voice comment, I simply speak the same words that are typed on the slide. This results in a VoiceThread slide that is accessible to all students. A blind student would use a screen reader to listen to my audio comment in VoiceThread Universal and a deaf student would read the text on the slide.

3. Instructions slide

Some key questions to address on this slide include:

- What do you expect from your students? What is each student required to contribute to the
VoiceThread? Here are some requirements to consider communicating to your students:

- How many comments are the students expected to leave in the VoiceThread?

- On which slides do you want them to leave these comments (are these slides clearly marked/identifiable)? Designing more slides than you need and giving students an option on which slides to comment is a way to integrate choice into their learning and it’s also a great strategy for managing larger classes and reducing redundancy in your comments. You will find that writing terrific, open-ended prompts is a fine art that takes awhile to master.

- What method are the students expected to use for their comments (voice/video/text or voice/video)?

- What do you expect students to do in their comment(s)? This, of course, will vary. You may have an activity with a variety of prompts and, therefore, will need to instruct students to read the prompt on each slide. Or you may have one set of instructions that apply to the entire activity that you can explain concisely and clearly here on this slide.

- When is the activity due? Avoid including a calendar date on this slide, as you will then need to update that date every term. Rather, think about phrasing due dates in general terms in the VoiceThread (due this Monday, for example, if your class units always end on a Monday) and include the specific date in your course management system. OR simply include the due date information in the course management system and remind students to look there for the information. Just be sure this information is shared in the same place with students each time.

- How many points is the assignment worth?

Strive to include instructions in text (on the slide) and in voice. Not only does this make your VoiceThread ADA compliant but it will also ensure the instructions resonate more clearly with more students and make the instructions easier to go back and reference later.

4. Tips for VoiceThread slide

Including a slide with some tips for using VoiceThread is an excellent way to support novice VoiceThread users at the start of the semester or to work in some scaffolding for problem areas you observe throughout a class. For example, for the first few weeks of a class my “Tips” slide remind students how to leave a comment, how to delete a comment, how to do basic troubleshooting, and reminds them of the importance of clicking “Save” after leaving a comment. Then after the group has established a comfort level with commenting, my “Tips” become more about improving the way students relate to one another (supporting the affective domain of learning) and improving the quality of their contributions.

Examples of Tips to include for students:

- Let’s work together to create an effective conversation! If you record a comment and decide
that you don’t like it, please delete the comment. Remember, deleting a comment is easy. Just play the comment and click on the garbage can icon in the comment bubble.

• After you have left your comment, read the prompt again that you have responded to. Then play your comment back, listen to it, and ask yourself if you have addressed the prompt completely. If you have not, then re-record your comment and delete the original comment.

Other tips to consider including:

• Demonstrate the Doodle tool to your students and explain to them how to use it and how it can help them communicate (and even remember!) their ideas more effectively.

• Remind students that plagiarism can happen in voice too! While referencing online and print sources to prepare one’s comments is a good strategy, comments should always be in one’s own words, regardless of whether they are typed or spoken.

5. Grading criteria slide
How will you grade the contributions made by your students? This should be lucidly explained before students make their contributions. How you communicate the grading criteria is a personal choice. Some instructors feel confident with using rubrics, while others struggle with them and some find them too restrictive. You may feel better starting with a list of the criteria you will assess as you grade. A VoiceThread slide is not a fabulous place to include a rubric if it’s really detailed because the text on the slide can become very difficult to read. You may choose to include a link to your rubric in your course management system and reference this information on a slide in the VoiceThread titled Grading Criteria. Or you could use the “Title” feature on this slide to include a link to an online version of the rubric.

Establishing your grading criteria is tricky and I often get requests from instructors for samples of my rubrics. Here are some samples I have collected that you may find helpful:

Sample VoiceThread Rubrics

• A general VoiceThread commenting activity
• Descriptive Writing
• Immigration: a group project by Thomas Cooper
• Regional Dialects Assessment

Alternatively, grading criteria could be shared with students in this format as well:

The following criteria will be used to grade the two required comments you leave in this VoiceThread:

• Originality: Each of your comments should contribute a new idea to the conversation or build onto a previous idea shared by another student. Avoid repeating ideas shared in earlier comments.
• Clarity: Are your ideas clearly communicated and understandable?

• Comprehension: Have you responded to the entire prompt on the screen?

If rubrics are new to you, you might feel more comfortable working with an online rubric maker which will give you samples to start with which you can modify for your own use.

6. Ground rules or norms slide
When students begin interacting online with new types of communication tools, they need to understand how to use these tools not only to leave a comment but also how to relate to others. In my online classes, I have ground rules that I implement course-wide and I have what I refer to as “norms” that I articulate and model specific to VoiceThread. Students (and instructors) need to learn how to relate to one another in VoiceThread to have it be fully effective for reflective learning.

To get started with creating your communication norms, I find it’s helpful to create a metaphor for VoiceThread to help students relate to the communication experience it provides. These are the norms I use in my VoiceThreads (by the way, feel free to use these if you like them!):

• Commenting in a VoiceThread is like sharing around a campfire.

• Each slide in a VoiceThread is like a room. In each room, there is a conversation unfolding. When you enter a room, be mindful of the conversation. Take care to stop and listen to what has been shared before your arrival. Then make a unique contribution or build onto what another person has shared (referencing them by name).

The significance of these norms on the success of your students’ learning is also correlated with the prompt to which a student responds or the overall learning objective(s) tied to the activity (these vary based upon how you have designed your VoiceThread). For example, let’s imagine a student named Pablo is using VoiceThread to create a digital storytelling project about pollution that involves creating media (videos and/or still photographs) that demonstrate evidence of pollution in his own community. He uploads his media into his own VoiceThread and adds comments to explain how the images demonstrate different types of pollution that have been learned about in class (and are included in the rubric).

Then Pablo shares his VoiceThread with his class Group and all the rest of the students in class do, as well. Now the next level of the project begins. The students begin to review each others’ VoiceThreads and, as instructed, select three VoiceThreads that they learned the most from. On these three, they leave at least one comment, which must be at least a 90-second reflection citing one thing they learned from the VoiceThread or make at least two connections between the content in the VoiceThread and the course material (a chapter in the book, for example).

Here are two scenarios for the second step that demonstrate how norms can enhance learning.

• Scenario 1 (ignores norms): Samantha begins to review Pablo’s VoiceThread. She listens to all of Pablo’s comments and looks intently at all of the photographs and the one video he has uploaded. She has made some interesting comparisons between her own project and Pablo’s. She makes a few notes on a piece of paper and then prepares to click record. She leaves a
voice comment on a slide with a photograph of a duck that has fishing line entangled around its wing. She shares that she also visited a park with ducks near her own house and found various other types of pollution.

- Scenario 2: (follows norms): Samantha reviews Pablo's VoiceThread. She listens to all of Pablo's comments, looks at his photographs and his video, and she also listens to the comments of two other students who have left feedback for Pablo already. The two students have shared how the pollution in his community was very similar to some of the evidence of pollution they found in their community. One of Pablo's photographs was an image of a duck with fishing line stuck to its wing. The students conveyed sadness about that photograph and listening to those students made Samantha think differently about that photograph and reflect more deeply on the areas in her community where ducklings are commonly found near popular fishing areas.

Samantha makes some notes and then leaves a comment in which she thanks her two peers for sharing their thoughts. She then goes on to share how much their comments made her think about how detrimental fishing line can be to ducks who live in residential communities and how she plans to take a stroll through her neighborhood park over the weekend to look for loose lines and maybe even save a life.

By listening to her peers, and reflecting on what she learned from their contributions in her own comment by building off their ideas, Samantha demonstrates a much higher degree of cognitive development in the second scenario.

Your task as the facilitator is to shepherd students through the norming process -- and that is no simple task. In fact, much like a gardener cultivating a variety of seedlings, you'll find students who blossom and others who don't. The best way to help shepherd norming occurs is to model it yourself. When you leave feedback in your VoiceThread activities (see Chapter 4) be sure to always model the norms you have established and praise students who do the same. To me, I find that the success across a class really varies from term-to-term. There are classes in which I have some very solid community leaders and the norming blossoms around them and there are other classes where things just don't go quite as well. As I've mentioned before, it's really not that different from teaching a face-to-face class. :)

7. Commenting slides
These are the slides on which your students will leave their contributions. They need to be clearly identifiable to your students. If you are starting by building your VoiceThread slides in a presentation software like Powerpoint or Keynote you could:

- Include a "Comment Here" title at the top of each slide on which students are required to comment.

- Include a slide in the VoiceThread that marks the beginning of the “commenting slides.” Whatever this slide might be, consider using the exact same slide for each activity so it becomes a consistent visual marker for students and conveys to them “this is where I go to find the slides on which I comment.” Also, it creates a process for you to re-use a slide from your existing VoiceThreads using the upload from media sources option.
If you are planning to upload a Powerpoint or Keynote file into VoiceThread, save it as a PDF first and then upload the PDF into VoiceThread. This is required for Keynote users and will eliminate formatting glitches you may experience with Powerpoint.

8. Check-in slide
The check-in slide is a fantastic way to build-in a continuous feedback loop for your students to share with you how things are going throughout the course. I add one of these slides on to the end of my formative assessments and how it is used and the frequency with which it is used varies in each class.

I have some Groups that have a cluster of 5-7 students that will actively share comments with me.

Students often share comments like these on the Check-In slides:

- “I’m settling in. Things are starting to feel more ‘normal.’”
- “When I heard the other students discuss this week’s topics it really helped me understand them better.”
- “I am starting to like leaving voice comments. My nerves are settling down, which feels great.”
- “I got really sick this week and staying on top of our assignments was a real struggle, but I did it!”
- “This week’s reading was really dry. I hope it gets better next week.”
- “I did not understand the difference between a tintype and an ambrotype until I saw the video that Michelle posted in Blackboard. Thanks for showing us the visuals. They really help me.”

The comment slides can be valuable opportunities for me to keep my finger on the pulse of a class and identify problems and successes in the class that might otherwise fly under my radar. At the same time, it’s not appropriate for students to share all feedback in a group setting like this one. From the beginning of the class, students are always informed of the importance of sharing personal concerns or issues with me directly, in a one-on-one exchange. I have an example of a “personal communication” that is not appropriate for sharing in a group setting (a VoiceThread or a discussion forum) and an example of a question that is appropriate to share in a group setting.

- **Appropriate for a group exchange:** "I am unclear about how to distinguish between a tintype and an ambrotype. What's the difference?"
- **Not appropriate for a group exchange:** "I am having surgery this weekend and will not be able to submit my assignment on time. May I have an extension?"

Rather than supplanting my one-on-one interactions with my students, the check-in slides are intended to augment communications and give students one final chance to share what is on their mind as they leave a VoiceThread.
Figure 3.2 Sample Check-In Slide #1

Figure 3.3 Sample Check-In Slide #2

return to top

Chapter 3 Take Aways
1. Develop consistency and clarity in the design of your VoiceThread activities to support your students’ overall learning success.

2. Design slides using clear contrast between background and font colors.

3. Design your slides with accessibility in mind. Type your brief script on the slide and read it in an audio or video comment, making the content accessible to all learners.

4. Include a rubric or clear grading criteria for each activity.

5. A “Tips” slide can be utilized to support various needs or new skills students acquire throughout a course.

6. Ground rules or norms help students understand how to relate to each other in a VoiceThread and encourage more advance levels of learning to develop.

7. Be certain to make ‘commenting slides’ easy to identify.

8. A Check-In slide at the end of a VoiceThread is a great way to keep a pulse on the class and identify successes and problem areas that might otherwise fly under your radar.
Chapter 4: Facilitating Learning with Feedback

VoiceThread resources for this chapter:

• Identities
• Commenting
• Reordering Comments

Now that we have laid the groundwork for designing clear, effective VoiceThreads, this chapter focuses on effective practices for using the commenting feature to leave feedback for your students. This is how to make teaching and learning come to life within a VoiceThread!

The regular participation of an instructor in an online class is a critical element of a learner's success. Just like in a face-to-face classroom, you play a pivotal role in cultivating a student's growth throughout an online class. Using VoiceThread as a formative assessment tool with your formative feedback woven into the flow of the students' participation, provides a continuous process of learning improvement.

Becoming a teacher...online
To me, this chapter gets to the heart of how to teach with VoiceThread because it's when I'm leaving feedback for my students that I feel my love for teaching ignite. It's when I'm leaving feedback that I feel my connection with my students come to life; my pride in their work shine through in my emotions; my excitement for my subject matter take over my formal composure; or my concern about a student who just isn't getting it shine through in my lengthy, detailed, empathetic explanation. It's when and how I become a teacher online.

And when students return my teaching efforts with their own commitment to learning is when teaching online is truly amazing. That is when you too will shake your head as you read articles about online learning representing the demise of quality education. Online learning can be just as rich, personalized, magical, and inspirational as a face-to-face learning experience. It's just a matter of the ingredients we choose to include in our recipe and how we simmer the pot. An online class may end up serving grab-and-go style of learning or it may end up creating a sumptuous, home-cooked meal around which students share, reflect, and enjoy each others' company as they learn in community.

Click here to view a 3-minute video excerpt of a student comment; my formative video feedback to a student; and the student’s response, demonstrating learning growth.

Using identities & reordering comments for effective moderation
Before you begin to leave feedback for students, however, I encourage you to implement a strategy that
will ensure your students will be able to easily distinguish your feedback comments from the rest of the comments on the slide. Creating a clear, visual hierarchy of this nature will ensure your students don’t miss your feedback – and that’s really critical! To achieve this goal, I use VoiceThread’s “Identities” feature.

One of the reasons this step is so imperative is because VoiceThread conversations are not threaded. This means comments left on a slide do not appear in any sort of hierarchy. In other words, if you leave a comment in response to the second comment on the slide, your comment will play at the end of the timeline, rather than fourth on the slide.

There are two additional points to understand here. First, if you or another student leaves more than one comment on a VoiceThread slide, those additional comments are recorded and they do play within the sequence of the conversation. You will find the comments either by playing the VoiceThread like a movie or by clicking through the segments in the gray horizontal bar at the bottom of the VoiceThread. The problem, however, is that there is no visual marker that the replies have been left. And, as we know, students who check back in on assignments are not likely to sit and listen to an entire conversation just to find out if there has been another comment added. If there could be a way to create a clear, colorful visual signifier of one's feedback -- that would be the way to go!

Using Identities to leave feedback remedies this problem. Identities provide a simple way for any VoiceThread account holder to create multiple profile pictures and/or names within a single account and easily toggle back and forth between these roles before she leaves a comment. It's a simple concept. Before you click the button to leave a comment, just click on your own profile picture that appears to the left side of the comment button. This will prompt the “Switch Identities” panel to expand, illustrated in Figure 4.1.

![Figure 4.1 Switch Identities Panel](image-url)
As you can see from my Switch Identities panel in Figure 4.1, I have set up several Identities within my VoiceThread account. Five of them include a profile picture that is titled “Feedback” with a different colored background. These are simple images I created in Pages (a Mac word processing application) using the insert colored rectangle and text tools. After the simple icon was generated, I took a screenshot of it using the free tool, Jing (screenshot/screencast application by TechSmith). Jing produces a .png file that I save to my computer and that is the file I upload into VoiceThread and use it as the profile picture for that particular Identity. To create the next one, I simply changed the background color, took another screenshot, saved it to my desktop, uploaded the .png file into VoiceThread as the profile picture for the next Identity, etc.

When I am ready to leave a feedback comment on a slide, all I need to do is open the Switch Identities panel (by clicking on the profile picture representing my current identity, to the left of the comment button), click on a feedback icon that has not yet been used on that particular slide, record my comment, and save it.

Finally, I take one more extra step with my newly created feedback comment. I want to be sure the feedback icon for the comment I have just recorded plays in sequence immediately after the comment or comments for which it was responding to, rather than at the very end of the VoiceThread conversation which is where the most recent comment will always appear. The creator of a VoiceThread has the ability to “reorder” the comments on any VoiceThread slide. So, I take the extra few seconds to slide that feedback comment into its logical sequence in the conversation. To move a comment, you simply hover your mouse cursor over the gray segment bar that represents the comment you want to move, press Shift (this will change the cursor arrow to a double arrow), while continuing to press Shift now drag that segment bar into the correct sequence in which you want it to play (see the resources below for help).

To learn more about how to reorder comments, click here and search for "reorder."

Click here to view a 3-minute YouTube video in which I demonstrate how to use Identities and re-order a comment on a VoiceThread slide.

Fostering norms through feedback

Now that you have your arms around the mechanics of how to moderate a conversation with Identities, let’s discuss the art of leaving feedback! As mentioned earlier, an effective facilitator will strive to leave a variety of feedback types for learners. For example, when students are participating in an ice breaker VoiceThread, as opposed to a formative assessment, you might think, “Oh, it’s not an assessment so I
don’t need to leave feedback.” Nope, not true. Your feedback plays a critical role in every part of a students’ learning.

In the first week of a class, having students focus on how to use VoiceThread effectively is an excellent low-stakes, on-boarding strategy and a very good way to ease students into what might be a stressful, new approach to learning for some. Your reassuring presence is not only important but critical at this stage. Actively leaving reassuring video and voice feedback is the best way to let your students know they are doing a great job and that you appreciate and enjoy the opportunity to hear their voices.

In chapter 3, we explored the importance of developing “norms” for your VoiceThread which present your students with guidelines for how they should relate to one another in the VoiceThreads. Feedback comments are a great way to model these norms for your students, as well as identify and showcase students who are modeling the norms.

Click here to view a 1-minute video of me leaving feedback for a student in a VoiceThread ice breaker.

Click here to view a 2-minute video excerpt of a student comment that models exceptional group norms and my feedback comment.

Formative feedback

Formative feedback is intended to provide meaningful information to a learner about the level to which she has mastered the objective being assessed, as well as assist the learner with improving where she is in the learning process. Therefore, for you to be able to leave formative feedback for your students, they must first have clarity about what you expect them to demonstrate in their comments. Looping back to our earlier chapters, effective teaching and instructional design are interrelated with each other. Using technology to support student learning starts with identifying clear, measurable learning objectives.

When you leave formative feedback, your message should focus on providing information about students' learning. What level of proficiency has the student demonstrated and why? What could the student have done to increase this level of proficiency?

At this point, you may have some practical questions about the timeline of my activities and when I leave my feedback, so I’d like to address some of those here. My online classes are organized into weekly units that launch on Tuesday mornings and close on Monday evenings. In each unit, students have a variety of assignments and activities. In most units there is a VoiceThread activity that is usually a commenting activity but may also be an editing activity. For the sake of this example, I am using my commenting activities for discussion. My students may comment at any time during the week and I find that each class varies in the flow of the commenting. My current class, for example, has an overwhelming number of students that comment on the final day, which is not ideal. But I have had other classes in which 30-50% of students will comment by Friday and that’s a great start to an activity.

While my students can comment whenever they want, I will be present in the VoiceThread on two separate days: once mid-way through the week (usually on Friday) and once at the end of the week (on Monday). I will leave feedback on each slide. When I enter a VoiceThread the first time (at mid-week), I
leave comments for every student who has participated (again, by this point, it typically is not a very high number). I like to think of this as their incentive to participate early and I think that works for some students but I am also very aware that most of my community college students do not have the luxury to learn whenever they want. They have extremely complex and difficult schedules to manage.

The activities themselves and the objectives on which the students are assessed vary greatly week-by-week. For about four weeks of the class, for example, students are learning about historical photographic processes and several of the prompts on slides are more objective in nature. I even manage the number of students who are permitted to comment on each slide by including a clear title at the top, “Two comments only.” Why do I do that? Because the concept covered in the prompt is very important and I want to be certain the knowledge constructed through the collaborative VoiceThread is valid. If I allow an open-ended number of responses to a prompt, I risk two things: 1) there will be increased redundancy and lower critical thinking in the responses and 2) the knowledge constructed through the comments would have a higher likelihood of being inaccurate. Therefore, for the prompts that are more focused and objective, I limit the number of comments and visit these slides more frequently during the activity.

So, what if the comments that are left in response to one of these prompts are inaccurate? In other words, what if a student “gets it wrong?” Well, that’s a great question. Remember, it’s a formative assessment, right? The students are expected to apply their understanding of our material and do their best. The material can be confusing and often it’s when a student shares an incorrect response and I clarify why it’s not quite right in my feedback comment that there is an increased clarity by other students.

My goal as the facilitator in these formative assessments is to actively assess their knowledge to ensure they are attempting to apply what they have learned. If a student leaves a comment that does not respond to a prompt, that is illogical and I cannot understand, seems to completely misunderstand the prompt, or repeats what another student has shared, then the student does not receive credit for that contribution. However, if I leave feedback for that student at mid-week she or he would have the opportunity to redo that contribution before the due date, as demonstrated in the video example below.

Click here to view an excerpt of a video comment in which I leave formative feedback for two students.

**Personalizing Your Online Class!**

If you think teaching online will limit your ability to cultivate powerful teaching moments between you and your students, you’re wrong. You are only limited by your misconceptions about the medium and the tools in your toolkit. Cultivating activities that create opportunities for you to give feedback to your students, in addition to a rhythm in your students’ learning pattern that ensures they review and reflect on your feedback will empower you to love your job. You might even reconnect with the original passion that made you want to become an educator long ago (or not so long ago?). But...teaching in this format also holds you accountable for delivering that feedback. If you aren’t as present one week, your students will likely notice and their learning will feel it. You may even get a note from a student saying, “Hi, I really missed your feedback this week. I hope things are ok.” How’s that for turning the tables? It happens!

In addition to improving your students’ comprehension of the course material, increasing their ability to
relate to their peers and reflect more deeply through these connections, your feedback also plays an important role in fostering the overall sense of community throughout your class. Comments are an opportunity to infuse who you are, to share your personality, to weave in personal stories about your past -- to infuse your online class with your own teaching style!

Deep learning - sharing back
As discussed in Chapter 2, deep learning fosters powerful, meaningful ties with information that can trigger significant shifts in engagement and motivation. When students experience moments of deep learning, they can be like powerful “ah ha” moments. These moments may occur when a learner makes a connection between a memory or example from everyday life of an abstract historical concept, for example. What’s even more powerful is when students share these “ah ha” moments in a video comment with their classmates -- and their instructor has the opportunity to highlight and build off these moments by offering feedback through a comment.

Recently, my online history of photography students were learning about nineteenth century optical advancements. One of the devices they read about in their text was the stereoscope, a two-eyed viewing device into which a user inserted a card that had two identical photographs printed on it, side by side. The user would place his eyes up to the device and peer inside, like a set of glasses. Upon viewing the card at the opposite end, the two images would merge into one, as a result of our brain’s glorious complexities, and create the illusion of a three-dimensional image.

In our formative assessment activity, one of my students, who had already fulfilled her requirements for the activity, chose to share an “ah ha” moment with the class that she had about stereoscopes. She used the video commenting option in VoiceThread to explain how a stereoscope is just like the View Master, a toy she had when she was a little girl. But to go one step further, she held her View Master up to show the class in front of her webcam. She then proceed to explain to the class how the View Master is like the stereogram (applying her knowledge), and then reflected on her memories as a young girl how it felt to view the 3d images. Wow!

Now, as the instructor here, I did not need to leave formative feedback, as this student was not responding to a prompt to demonstrate knowledge. However, she was going above and beyond the expectations of a learner and she was demonstrating deep learning, as well as sharing her learning moment with the class in video through a very eloquent presentation. She was giving to her learning community. As a facilitator of a learning community, it was my role to give back. So, I did leave her feedback and in my feedback, I shared my own story with her about my childhood experiences with View Masters.

Click here to view a 4-minute video of an online student sharing her deep learning experience and my community-building feedback.

Using feedback comments to deliver micro-lectures
There are some areas of my course that, over time, I have began to utilize the comments in VoiceThread
to incorporate additional resources and information, expanding upon the content shared in the learning unit. As you teach with VoiceThread, you may naturally find yourself leaving feedback for students that covers the same topics each semester. I have a few areas in a few units where I leave comments that share the same additional content with my students each semester. While these comments I leave each term appear to be spontaneous feedback comments (and they are unscripted and recorded each term), they’re actually planned in the sense that I leave the same basic comment each semester on the same slide and the comment I leave references a new piece of content that is covered in the quiz the students take the following unit.

To be more clear, my students participate in the VoiceThread and I leave feedback between the start date and the end date. When the next unit begins, the students are assigned to review the VoiceThread from the previous unit to review in its entirety (commenting is now disabled), including all of my feedback comments. By reviewing my feedback comments, points of confusion are clarified and topics covered in the unit are augmented with further resources.

In these feedback comments, I take care to use the Doodle tool if I am discussing a particular image on the screen, I can hold up an object (like a Kodak Brownie camera or an old tintype photograph) or I can follow my comment with text comment that includes a link to a website that might include an image for the students to reference or a website with additional resource information.

Click here to view a 3-minute excerpt of me leaving feedback for a student in which I use a video and a text comment to teach additional concepts about the historical significance of a photograph’s subject matter. The text comment allows me to include a link to an online version of a Renaissance painting for students to reference and visually compare to the photograph in the VoiceThread.

Ultimately what you need to develop beyond the instructional design covered here are the summative assessments or the assessments of learning. These will be your opportunities to ensure your students have reached the ultimate pinnacle of your learning paradigm -- and perhaps they will demonstrate this through the creation of a VoiceThread!

Chapter 4 Take Aways

1. Leaving feedback for students makes you an active participant in their learning journey.

2. Using VoiceThread’s Identities feature and reordering comments is an effective way to ensure students will not miss your feedback comments.

3. All feedback is not the same! Vary your feedback types and be mindful of the role your comments play in the development of your class.

4. Feedback comments are powerful opportunities to model discussion norms and point out exceptional student contributions.

5. For formative feedback to be meaningful, it must do two things: cite a learner’s current level of mastery of the concept being assessed and point out what they’ve done well or what they need to improve.
6. Leaving feedback for your students is an opportunity to infuse your online class with your personal teaching style by sharing personal stories and augmenting your instructional content with additional micro-lectures.

return to top
Continuing Your Learning!

As you continue your implementation of VoiceThread into your teaching, you will have questions and will benefit from having a community to share and learn with. I am hopeful that you will join one of the groups below and contribute your questions, ideas, and sample VoiceThreads so faculty around the world can learn from you. Welcome to the VoiceThread community.

1. Join the Teaching with VoiceThread Google+ Community and share your VoiceThread examples with the other members through a post or coordinate a Hangout with the Community.

2. Join the Teaching with VoiceThread LinkedIn Group to connect and share with professional colleagues.

3. Contribute to the VoiceThread Digital Library.

I look forward to learning with you!

Michelle Pacansky-Brock
@brocansky
TeachingWithoutWalls.com

References

Chapter One


Chapter Two


return to top