

## *Assessment of Technological Tools to Support Studies in the Visual Arts*

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The purpose of the AP grant was to test Voicethread as an alternative to the Wikispace within Blackboard for group discussions and projects.<sup>1</sup> My courses are designed for students to do an assignment (written or the making of art), then have discussions with fellow students about the assignment, then produce a group project that takes their findings further. Thus, it is critical that a technical tool support these efforts rather than be a cumbersome learning challenge that makes doing the work for the class difficult. This report is filled with experiential observations from testing Voicethread in a visual heavy class of over 200 students<sup>2</sup>.

Many of the challenges my students experienced using Voicethread were exacerbated by the large size of my class. When 20% of my students had difficulty logging onto Voicethread, that translated into 47 individual students who were stressed and delayed. While many of the processes required to set up Voicethread seem simple enough, there are actually a lot of steps that the students themselves need to take, which, in my experience, is a recipe for error to take place.<sup>3</sup> Students are required to go to Voicethread themselves and set up an account, set up their own assignment spaces, and successfully make their assignment available to others when it is complete. Anyone who has worked with online classes knows that it is common for someone to read directions carefully and still make errors. In this

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<sup>1</sup> While I initially also wanted to test Rabbit, it became clear that it was not feasible to use this product as only students with Macs could use it.

<sup>2</sup> I began with 236 students, had 15 drop within two weeks and had 28 students withdraw thereafter. In the ten years of teaching this course online, I have never had such a high attrition rate. I do not recall a semester where more than a combined 10 students dropped and withdrew. Since this was the first semester using Voicethread, it seems likely that confusion surrounding the new tool was the cause of immense stress for students.

<sup>3</sup> In essence, when one takes into account the inevitable confusion that a certain percentage of students are going to have getting started on Voicethread, extra time needs to be added to the course (and taken away from something else) to allow for the processing of this technical information. This would need to be at least a week when one takes into account not only the students' stress level but the amount of time it takes to communicate via email taking into account various schedules and hearing back from tech support.

case, a simple error would lead to students not being able to access the professor's sample Voicethread and students receiving dozens of emails from Voicethread because of students who accidentally made their individual assignments available to the entire class. A tool that allows for more professor control over these types of situations is desirable.

Once students figured out Voicethread, it was a powerful atmosphere for discussions. Generally, students left much more descriptive comments than they had in within Blackboard's wiki space or discussion board. I expect that if the students had not been challenged by Voicethread in other ways at the beginning of the semester, they would have felt more comfortable to use some of the intriguing features like the microphone and being able to draw over the image to highlight certain aspects. One improvement in Voicethread would be to be able to compare and contrast images within the same slide.

Voicethread has been lauded by many as a unique tool for inspiring discussion.<sup>4</sup> It would appear to be particularly ideal for the field of art history, which is about grappling with images. In my experience, I have found it a challenge for students to deal with formal analysis ("reading images") online because one has to go back and forth between text written describing an image and the image itself. In my lectures within Blackboard I have done voiceovers, which assist the students greatly. But, until Voicethread, there was still no way for the students to use their voice. Voicethread allows the students to record themselves rather than, or in addition to, writing text. One would think that this was a great option for students, but less than 1% of students chose to do assignments using this feature.

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the positive reviews for Voicethread are K-12 courses, in which the teacher is able to work with the students one on one and teach them how to use the tool. Michelle Pacansky-Brock, Voicethread and author of *How to Humanize Your Online Class with Voicethread* (2013), is a strong proponent for the tool and, like myself, an art historian. However, her experience does not seem to include large scale classes. Michelle Pacansky-Brock is an Instructional Technologist with a website devoted to teaching with emerging technologies: <http://www.teachingwithoutwalls.com/>

Only 5 out of the approximately 200 students in this class recorded their voices instead of typing their comments, even though speaking would have seemingly been a lot quicker and easier than writing. Certain aspects of setting up Voicethread are quite challenging and time consuming for the professor as well, and these are compounded by the increase in numbers of students. While using any online tool takes preparation and planning, the professor cannot set up many aspects of Voicethread until the course starts (or right before). This is due in part to the fact that each Voicethread student slot has been purchased and so the professor needs to be as certain as possible that a particular student is taking the course before getting them set up. (As an aside, if 1 student drops the course after a few days, the University still incurs the expense from Voicethread.) In order to set students up, each email address has to be sent to Voicethread, along with other information, in a specially designed spreadsheet.<sup>5</sup>

Again, this process appears to be designed for smaller classes, and Voicethread designers may not be aware of the challenges this causes for large-scale classes. Grading and giving feedback to students is a critical part of improving discussion and learning. While Voicethread's format creates exciting possibilities, the practical aspects of how students will receive feedback should be better addressed. In order for a professor to give feedback to a student with Voicethread, other students would be able to read it, limiting the critical nature of the feedback. Ideally, professors would be able to join in on many student discussions, but there is not a clear way to go through group (or individual) projects and discussions in an organized fashion.

One important aspect of my course is the group work. Within Blackboard, setting up groups is very simple. Translating this into Voicethread was not so easy. I had researched Voicethread enough to realize that one way to do this was to create special labels for each person, which could later help to place them into groups, when creating the original spreadsheets. This process is incredibly time consuming. Considering that Voicethread is designed specifically for discussions, it would seem that

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Voicethread has a sign-up option in which students follow a link the professor gives them. However, in my case, creating particular groups would have later been much more difficult using this process.

group features would be more rich and pliable. Not only was it difficult to create groups, but it was extremely difficult to grade them. It is hoped that in further iterations of Voicethread they add features that enable the professor to track specific students, see all the postings for a specific student, search for a specific groups more easily, create groups more easily, and perhaps even find a way to input grades for each discussion/assignment.

As I continue my research into using Voicethread for large Art Appreciation courses, I plan to send this report to Voicethread. Their assistance was always very helpful and friendly, and I am interested to hear their feedback on some of the issues I have addressed. In addition, I have submitted a request to present a paper on this topic at the Southeastern College Art Association, a conference for art and art history professors. I sincerely thank Academic Partnerships for the opportunity to explore this tool.