

VoiceThread: Enabling Peer Feedback in First Year Computer Engineering

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Class Size

52 students, divided into three groups

Discipline

Communications module with Computer Engineering Students

Feedback Approaches

In-class dialogue and informal feedback; self-evaluation; peer and teacher feedback; feedforward using exemplars.

Technologies

VoiceThread (voicethread.com)

Challenge & Aim

The provision of constructive peer feedback and dealing with feedback from peers is a key element of all communication. This case study presents how VoiceThread, an online application used to create multimedia presentations and conversations, was used to enable first year students to give and receive feedback. In the process, the presentation skills of the student are enhanced.

The learning activity required students to create an audio-visual presentation on VoiceThread.

The topic was simple: students had to show (via images) and talk about (via their voice comments) a hobby, an interest or an area they were interested in and one where they actively tried to develop themselves. To complete Part A of the activity, students were required to share this VoiceThread with the teacher and at least one other classmate. In Part B, students had to comment on a VoiceThread shared with them by a classmate. The activity was worth 10% of the overall module.

The learning outcomes for this activity were for students to be able to:

- present an aspect of their personal development for professional purposes;
- practise their presentation skills including voice production;
- receive constructive feedback from a peer;
- provide constructive feedback to a peer.

Evidence from the Literature

The VoiceThread activity provided multiple opportunities for effective feedback using a contemporary and dialogic approach as highlighted in the Y1Feedback Synthesis of the literature. As VoiceThread was a new platform for students which needed significant explanation and exploration, the activity generated *informal dialogue* during class and computer lab sessions over the four weeks of its lifespan. *Feedforward using an exemplar* on VoiceThread was included and the exemplar was used to practise giving and receiving feedback also. VoiceThread is recognised for its capacity to develop presentations skills outside of class (Serrani 2015) as students can *self-evaluate* their voice production in listening back to their own recorded comments. The activity explicitly required peer-to-peer interaction and

feedback in the form of sharing and commenting on each other's VoiceThread. *Teacher-student feedback* also occurred. Finally, enabled by a year-long delivery structure, this semester I VoiceThread activity will also *feedforward* in semester II to the main activity of the Communications module: preparing an e-portfolio and presenting it. Overall, the VoiceThread activity has helped students to develop a stronger bond and sense of community in the class which have been identified as important for student retention.

Feedback Approach

The activity ran over a four-week period in semester I with one weekly contact class (1.5 hours) as follows:

- Class 1 (regular classroom): Teacher shows an exemplar on VoiceThread, explains activity, hands out assignment guidelines and obtains consent to upload data to VoiceThread; students informally discuss their potential topics in small groups and ask the teacher questions.
- Class 2 (in computer lab): Students practise creating, sharing and commenting on a VoiceThread; further informal discussion about choice of topic and the mechanics of the application.

Feedback Approach

- Class 3 (in a computer lab): Students work on their VoiceThreads; teacher ensures that students have partners for sharing and commenting; students practise giving and receiving feedback using the teacher's exemplar.
- Class 4 (in a computer lab): Students complete the VoiceThread activity.

This case study describes a first iteration of the activity which ran during October – November 2016. Minor modifications only were made during second and third iterations in November 2016 and January 2017 as the data had not been fully analysed. Future iterations of the activity in 2017-2018 will be modified more substantively to reflect the findings of the study as outlined below.

Outcomes

Overall, the activity was successful and students achieved the learning outcomes. Student feedback indicated a positive response to the activity, but at the same time, students also expressed discomfort with the activity. Discomfort in itself should not be taken as an entirely negative point, but rather can be viewed as an indicator that students were crossing a new threshold as part of the learning process (Cousins, 2006).

Support was given to supporting students to minimize any discomfort associated with the challenge of the task. Attention was paid to fostering a sense of community in the class through small group and pairwork activities in the weeks prior to using VoiceThread. Students also received help in the form of detailed assignment instructions and guidelines; these also included a model for giving feedback. A sample VoiceThread was provided and classes were scheduled in a computer laboratory. Students were supported through class discussions and weekly reminders on Moodle of what the next step of the activity was.

On reflection, further supports are needed to scaffold the feedback element of the VoiceThread activity as this was challenging for students and one which I felt I did not adequately support with theory. Further iterations of the activity will take a more structured approach to Part B (the “feedback” element) and will include a theoretical class where different models of feedback are reviewed and discussed. Based on student feedback, it appears greater emphasis needs to be placed on the notion of receiving feedback, as much as giving it. In 2017-2018, I propose to add additional elements in the form of two short written reflections to the assignment. The purpose of these elements is to both prepare students for the receiving of feedback and help debrief them afterwards.

Student Response

Students recognised the benefit of presenting their stories (“*You can talk about stuff that you’re proud of*”), and they also expressed interest in listening to their peers’ VoiceThreads (“*I would have loved to see everyone else’s, because only two or three shared with me, but I would have loved to have seen the whole class, and the other two classes*”).

Nonetheless, there was a high level of concern about having to create an audio-visual presentation (“*I’d rather talk about it in person than record it and have someone listen to it*”; “*I’d be concerned about what people would think*”). One student suggested that the timing of the activity in the early part of semester I was not ideal, but admitted that it did help the class to form bonds. Because of feelings of shyness and embarrassment, many students did not record their comments during the computer laboratory session, but in the privacy of their homes. Several students noted a dislike of hearing their own voice in the recorded comments (“*when you hear yourself back, you always sound a bit funny, don’t you? ... That’s what had me a bit worried*”) but at the same time, this affordance clearly promoted self-evaluation (“*Listening back, I wasn’t comfortable with it, so I deleted it and did it again and again*”).

Part B of the activity also posed some challenges. This part required students to provide feedback to a peer, including making a suggestion for improvement in the future. The difficulty stemmed from the reluctance to be negative towards a peer (“*it was all very civilised, it was constructive rather than criticism*”) and also a lack of any obvious area for improvement (“*I found it really hard to do. He explained everything well, there wasn’t anything to say criticism I could make; all I could say was that he was good*”). It is also worth noting that two students said they had not gone back to VoiceThread to check the comment left for them by their peer.

Key Points for Effective Practice - Recommendations

To implement this feedback approach, the following steps need to be taken:

- Purchase a VoiceThread subscription and ensure complete familiarity with the platform before launching the activity;
- If VoiceThread is not embedded within the Institute VLE, obtain consent from students to

upload name and student email addresses to www.voicethread.com (bulk adding members is possible via csv file) and assign them to a group;

- Provide written assignment guidelines to students and create an example of the piece of work to be created on VoiceThread;
- Schedule classes for groups of 15-20 students in a computer laboratory with headphones / mics enabled so students can explore the platform and ask questions;
- Allow adequate time for the activity to be undertaken and for questions to emerge and be answered (4-week period with one class per week);
- Address student concerns regarding sharing their stories via VoiceThread and to support them in the practice of giving and receiving feedback.

References

Cousin, G. (2006) ‘An introduction to threshold concepts’, *Planet No. 17*, available: <http://www.gees.ac.uk/planet/p17/gc.pdf>. [accessed on 14 December 2016].

Serrani, J., Nanni, A. and A. Quietì (2015) ‘IEPs and the Web: Maximizing Student Potential’, *The European Conference on Technology in the Classroom 2015 Official Conference Proceedings* [online] Available at: <https://goo.gl/E0zAeA>. Accessed 14 December 2016.

Contact



If interested in finding out more about this approach or technology, please contact Dr Mairéad Seery at mseery@ait.ie

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