Personalizing the Digital Classroom:

Enlivening Threaded Discussions with Web 2.0 Applications

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The increasing number of courses and even entire programs that are offered online has given rise to the need for more dynamic online environments and the creation of an authentic instructor presence both audibly and visually. The increase in online learning opportunities has also opened the door to the world in a way that was, until recently, impossible for most people who lacked the resources to study abroad. Now the exchange of information, coursework, and entire programs may be handled with relative ease from across the globe. While most educators acknowledge the benefits of addressing each student’s unique learning style, individualization is often lost in the digital classroom environment. In fact, some students seem hesitant to enroll in online courses over concerns of communication barriers between themselves and the instructor, limited interaction with classmates, difficulty perceiving online instructors as experts and mentors, and having the discipline to actually participate in the class in a timely manner. In order for online instructors to overcome these perceived (and sometimes very real) challenges, it seems important to find ways to build on student prior knowledge and on knowledge progressive throughout the course material, allow more opportunity for feedback from the instructor and among fellow classmates, and offer more online opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding—opportunities that are actualized in a variety of ways to address diverse learning styles.

In order to address the needs of the digital student body, two educators, both of whom have begun and developed fully online graduate programs in the past five years, have sought ways to enhance learning in the digital classroom, to make learning engaging for the students and stimulating for the instructors. Starting with the online templates provided by the university where they teach, the educators have continued to enhance the digital classroom environment through inventive instructional techniques that encourage interactive learning, shifting from a teacher-centered to a student-centered online experience.

This poster session will include the rationale behind and demonstrations of tools used to authenticate the online learning experience, as well as student products and student feedback about the learning process. For this session the focus will be discussion forums, which are at the heart of online classes. Threaded discussions are where the class becomes a true learning community if there is effective preparation and design of the forums so that they are interactive and students are engaged. There exists many Web 2.0 applications that can be used in threaded discussions to make them more interactive and motivating, combating traditional, weekly text-based threaded discussions that can become extremely tedious and can be monotonous over time.
Screencast-o-matic, http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/, is a screen capture application. With the free account, three fifteen minute recordings can be made and saved. The professional account is only $15 per year, offering many more options for instructors.

With screencast-o-matic, threaded discussions may involve experiences such as:

- Students evaluate web sites and give virtual tours of the sites as the response to a threaded discussion question. Other students respond to what the student has shown in the screen cast.
- Students can create assignments or lessons and teach them through the threaded discussion. This is particularly helpful to teacher preparation programs with online components or fully online courses, since it is often difficult to visit in person students enrolled in those classes.

Voki, www.voki.com, is a web site where avatars can be created, along with a one minute recording, and posted with a link.

With this avatar, Voki may enhance threaded discussions through:

- Students creating avatars that can be used to answer questions posed in discussion. Because they are limited to 60 second recordings, the responses must be concise.
- Students can use their Voki to respond to classmates in the discussion rather than using text.

VoiceThread, www.Voicethread.com, is a site where a collaborative, interactive slide show can be posted on the Internet. Students can leave both written and recorded comments on each slide.

VoiceThread opens up the possibilities of threaded discussion in a number of ways.

- The instructor creates a presentation on which he or she records both course content and questions on the slides. Students may then respond to those questions. A slide can be included where they are to leave comments for their classmates.
- Students can create their own Voice Threads to introduce themselves during the first week of class.
- Students may conduct teaching demonstrations through narrated presentations using their fee student accounts.

Voxopop, www.voxopop.com, is a site on which talk groups are created. The instructor sets up a free account and sends the link to students.

For threaded discussions, Voxopop adds the vocal element to the conversation in ways such as:

- The instructor makes the first recording and poses the questions. Students then record their responses to the questions and comment to classmates in the talk group.
- Students demonstrate metacognition of the course materials through creation of questions to which fellow classmates and the instructor may respond.

Fodey, www.fodey.com, allows newspaper clippings to be created and saved as a jpeg file.
Within the context of threaded discussions:

- Instructors may create newspaper clippings with the question(s) posed that are to be answered in the discussion. Students then create their own clipping and post to the discussion as a jpeg attachment.

WallWisher, [www.wallwisher.com](http://www.wallwisher.com), allows the instructor to set up a board with virtual sticky notes.

For threaded discussions WallWisher might be used for the following.

- The instructor poses a question for the discussion forum and has students post responses to the wall using a virtual sticky note.
- Students post questions to the instructor or to fellow students.