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VoiceThread: Building a Mosaic of Asynchronous Communication

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By Mark Szymanski

For those of us early adopters, threaded discussions on discussion boards were one of the first forays into having “discussions” on the Internet. At the time the most important aspect of these discussions was the ability to have them over time, asynchronously, with people who were not in the same physical place as we were. Today, as we embrace the world of mobile web devices and micro-blogging, they seem like simple ideas; text-based, if you will.

Most of our communication on the Internet has been done with and still takes the form of text-a symbol system that represents our oral language. In some cases this is the appropriate and preferred method of communication for sending messages. Text messaging and instant messaging have all taken their place in our new communication culture. But because it is a symbol system for language, it is-in it’s strictest sense-representational and not real. Thus, the content of what we communicate about is sometimes lost in translation along with the nuance and purpose we reveal when we speak to each other. A current example would be the use of mapping on the Internet. Today, instead of giving someone directions to a place, most of us simply give out the address and zip code to the place. This makes it easy data to put into web-based mapping software or our new mobile web-enabled devices. It seems cumbersome to listen to and write down step-by-step directions. Text works, but in this case, it’s not the most effective way to communicate.

But, all this is changing as bandwidth and processing speed increase and data compression improves. We’ve all watched other mediums, video, audio, images, become more prevalent and powerful on the Internet. They are more popular because they provide raw content, no description necessary. No need to describe what something looks like when you can just see it. Today, our methods of synchronous or asynchronous communication still hold, but the thing that has changed over time is the content we comment on and the ways we comment. VoiceThread [1], web-based collaborative software is a way to facilitate media rich asynchronous communication on the Internet.
In a VoiceThread, a moderator posts content for invited people to comment on in a six-inch by six inch window in the middle of the browser window. The uploaded content can be most any form of media we commonly use on the web, images, videos, text, PDFs, and Office files. At its core, like the bulletin board systems and discussion forums that it follows, VoiceThread is, technologically, a web-based application that manages content created by users. VoiceThread is designed to be used by authors who are moderators of a conversation with invited people. Perhaps as a nod to distinguish itself from the older of asynchronous communication, the VoiceThread people use the term “conversation” instead of “discussion.” In this way, the environment is an exclusive one, but one that allows for feedback from a specific group of people who are selected to give feedback or participate in a discussion because of their qualifications.

In addition to the content that is commented on, the distinguishing feature of a VoiceThread is the way in which people can comment on the content. People can comment in five different ways using voice (with a microphone or telephone), text, audio file, or video (via a webcam). In addition to the actual comment, VoiceThread gives the commenter the ability to draw, or in their words doodle on the content file. They do this by incorporating a basic draw tool into the window. Again, instead of using text to describe something, the user gets to draw, circle, underline, or in some other way visually identify a part of a file they are talking about. After a participant leaves a comment, a thumbnail image of the commenter appears on the edge of the content window. As more and more people comment, their thumbnail profile pictures line the outside of the content window, creating a tile mosaic of contributors. This allows all the contributors to see and hear all the comments.

During the past few years, VoiceThread has begun to build a community of users that is steadily growing. The community consists mostly of educators and visual and performing artists who are seeking feedback or conversations about content that is mostly not text based. Ironically, they have a forum where users can post questions and get answers to all things VoiceThread. Most of the discussions are technical question-technical answer interchanges. Thus, it seems appropriate and oddly familiar that the technical questions are text-based.

In a broader sense, VoiceThread is giving voice to other modes of communication. And in doing this, they give voice to people who use content other than text in their work and world. This seems like the natural evolution of things as our virtual and real worlds become more seamlessly interwoven. By doing this, it’s also creating a place for all people to communicate effectively using non-text-based tools. This is no accident. VoiceThread is a space designed on principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) [2]. Universal Design for Learning focuses on designing digital spaces and learning environments that enable all individuals to develop knowledge and gain access to content and information. The people at VoiceThread have written an accessibility white paper [3] that explains their compliance with Section 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act that requires Federal agencies to make digital content accessible to people with disabilities. You can read a profile about how Gallaudet University, a university that specializes in serving deaf and hard of hearing students, uses VoiceThread to on their web page [4].
The “thread” in VoiceThread implies the threading of a needle and the threading of a discussion in the discussion forum sense of the word. Thus, VoiceThread does stand on the shoulders of these early giants of asynchronous technology. But, what we see happening in a VoiceThread environment is different. It’s more like a mosaic than a tapestry. The mosaic, art created by assembling small images, speaks to the collective development of a larger work of art which in this case allows everyone to contribute to the development of a collective understanding in our new virtual worlds.

References


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ONE THOUGHT ON “VOICETHREAD: BUILDING A MOSAIC OF ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION”

Sherita Cooch  
on January 30, 2014 at 6:15 PM said:

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