VoiceThread: A Design Critique Model for Implementing Asynchronous Feedback into Online, Problem-Based Learning

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Abstract

VoiceThread was integrated into a traditional interior design studio to promote the fluid exchange of ideas. Using design education as a model for problem-based learning, the authors share the experience and benefits of using online, asynchronous feedback as a supplement to in-person critiques. The teaching and learning experiences suggest VoiceThread as a practical method for facilitating the quality feedback necessary for project development, and as an effective tool that enhances any course.

The Importance of Fluid, Descriptive Dialogue

Formative assessment is an important aspect of design education. As an essential form of assessment to the design studio, critiques facilitate student growth by activating a dynamic exchange of ideas. The benefits of fluid, descriptive dialogue are clear. However, maintaining the fluidity of such exchanges can be a challenge for studios that meet twice a week with intervening gaps of time. Email is a critical form of communication outside of class, but lacks the dynamic reciprocity of dialogue that Schön (1987) describes as fundamental to facilitate practice-based learning.

Schön’s model of “reflection-in-action” stresses that mutual discourse in design is essential, and should “take place in the context of the student’s attempts to design” and should use “actions as well as words.” This suggests that the process integral to developing projects cannot be coached without the inclusion of multivariate interactions, namely in-person dialogue. Traditional design critiques in this way are fitting. Schön’s work suggests that instructors play a critical role as learners work through a project, and that their involvement has the most impact when it matches the student's pace. Such involvement outside of class time is often a challenge. To supplement this, most scaffolding beyond the studio is attempted as written correspondence via email.

Most educators agree with Schön, that in-person methods are the best way to communicate with and mentor students. But, what is preserved when correspondence is spoken, but not necessarily in-person? Ice et al. (2007) suggests that verbalized feedback conveys more nuance, and that this expressive communication makes learners three times more likely to apply the feedback when developing their work. The study also suggests that learners perceive nuanced feedback as more caring and personalized. Asynchronous methods for exchanging feedback are an effective means of accomplishing spoken, nuanced interactions. Davies (2007) work examining the descriptive nature of verbalized assessment suggests that when “descriptive feedback is increased, students learn more.” Davies contends that formative assessment that does this “feeds forward,” supporting the conditions for student growth and the development of ideas.

Integrating an Online Alternative to In-Person, Project Feedback

To explore how technology can facilitate descriptive feedback outside of class, VoiceThread was integrated into a traditional design studio as an online critiquing platform. VoiceThread is an online discussion space where visual media can be uploaded and presented as a “thread.” The program allows viewers to give feedback by leaving typed, audio, or video comments illustrated with a drawing tool. The tool allows participants to edit their comments before delivering them and results in comments that are clear, effective, and useful. Threads are accretive, built upon over time. For archival purposes, they can be exported as digital video files for later viewing. Application of this longitudinal model of assessment is powerful, tracking the life and development of a project and student growth.
Peer Critiques

The students were initially introduced to VoiceThread as a way to conduct randomized, small group peer critiques. Administering the threads enabled monitoring and mediation of the process. The discussions that ensued were meaningful, productive and richly descriptive. Students enjoyed the experience because it provided “space” outside of class to share and discuss their work, and provided an alternative critique process. Thread monitoring allowed the authors to assess the application of knowledge and vocabulary of the student critics.

Outsider Critiques

The asynchronous attributes of VoiceThread made it easy to also connect with outside professionals. The resulting critiques activated rich discussions about refining and actualizing the designs. Also, the process encouraged students to craft quality presentations to match the significance of their audience. Students shared that they carefully considered the feedback, that the experience made them feel connected to industry, and liked that the discussions were not isolated to a single afternoon. The professionals shared an affinity for the online method, and deemed it an engaging and smart strategy to dress up the revered critique: a digital upgrade with equal rigor.

Unexpected Outcomes

Surprisingly, VoiceThread transformed how the students solicited feedback. The authors noted a drastic decline in email that was synchronous to an increase in student-generated threads; they adopted the tool as the primary way to communicate. One student shared, “This online program allows us to view the work of other students across different sections and is allowing us to get feedback out of class without wasting valuable class time.” For design studios that meet twice a week with intervening gaps of time, this improves the fluidity of dialogue paramount to Schön’s model.

Observed Benefits to Teaching and Learning

The authors observed four benefits to implementing VoiceThread. First, the tool gets students talking about their work and the development of their ideas. Students embrace it as a means to contribute to conversations, initiate dialogue, provide feedback, and demonstrate their ability to engage in productive discourse. Second, the tool provides opportunities to expose students to a diverse group of professionals outside their immediate community. This enriches the experience and discussions. Third, the tool allows students to privately and repeatedly review their feedback. Fourth, the accretive nature of the tool allows discussions to extend far beyond the limits of an afternoon because participants can contribute to a project thread as long as it is active. The ability to revisit any past discussion is informative to both instructors and students, offering useful post-project reflection.

As an added observation, the students liked using the online technology. VoiceThread increased the frequency of verbal dialogue, and students enjoyed having access to more descriptive feedback. Students shared that the online discussions encouraged them to push the development of their ideas rather than spin their wheels or start over. Furthermore, they expressed appreciation for having a “real” method to communicate with their instructor outside of studio. These student testimonies reflect the findings of Ice et al (2007), suggesting that students gather more meaning from nuanced feedback, and that VoiceThread is an effective, online means to exchange it. As suggested by Davies (2004) and observed here, encouraging frequent and descriptive feedback indeed “feeds forward.”

Conclusion

VoiceThread is an invaluable and rich counterpart to a traditional, in-person design critique. However, this experience illustrates a working model that educators of any discipline can use to facilitate problem-based learning, and enhance teaching and learning.
References

