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Using VoiceThread to Support Close Reading from a Distance

By Noreen Moore

Faculty know that the increased think-time provided by asynchronous online discussion allows for deeper and more active deliberation by students than is possible in face-to-face courses. But this advantage is often lost as online discussions revert to personal opinions and anecdotes. One method for keeping a discussion on track is to organize it around close reading and analysis of course texts.

Close reading is about getting readers to focus intently and systematically on text in order to extract meaning from it (Brummett, 2010). Close reading is about more than simply demonstrating an understanding of a text; it is also about engaging with a text on a deeper level, which includes analyzing the structure and message, evaluating its overall quality, connecting it with other texts, and interpreting its implications (Shanahan, 2014).

I found that VoiceThread is a good vehicle for facilitating online discussion around close reading of texts. Here are three methods to use in your courses to improve the quality of your discussions.

Multiple readings strategy

One strategy is to have students engage in multiple readings of the same text for different purposes. Shanahan outlines foci for three separate readings of a text. During the first read, students focus on extracting the main ideas. During the second read, students consider how the text is structured, its purpose and audience, and key vocabulary. Finally, during the third read, students analyze key points, evaluate the quality, interpret its implications, and/or compare parts within the text or compare the text to another text. This strategy gives students practice with a procedure for conducting a close reading of a text, and the ensuing discussion allows faculty to see at what level students may have difficulty reading: comprehension, structure analysis, or critical thinking.

Students can work individually or in small groups to try out this strategy on VoiceThread. After explaining the strategy, I showed students how to create three different identities in VoiceThread in order to represent their thoughts during the three different reads. For example, "First Reading," became

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3 >>

TIPS FROM THE PROS

Cultivating Relationships Online

By John Orlando

Faculty spend most of their training in learning their subject matter. But when 17,000 students were asked to list the qualities of an effective teacher, "respectful" and "responsive" came out above "knowledgeable."

Knowledge of the subject matter is more of a baseline for good teaching—above a minimum, more is not better. When I ask faculty to list the qualities of their own best teachers, relationship traits such as "caring" come out at the top.

Demonstrating care for students and developing rapport with them are critical to good teaching. While it may seem that the lack of face-to-face contact inhibits efforts to cultivate rapport with online students, there is a variety of simple things that faculty can do to foster a learning relationship.

Personalization

Rich media, such as video and audio, helps personalize us to others. Think about the difference between reading an author's biography and hearing an interview with that author on the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5 >>

THIS ISSUE

2
Google Forms for the Online Classroom

4
What Research Tells Us about Online Discussion

8
How to Keep from Going MIA in Your Online Course

6
Rubric Options for an Online Class



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Google Forms for the Online Classroom

By John Orlando

Among the myriad of excellent apps that Google offers, Google Forms is one of the most useful for online teachers. Google Forms is designed as a simple system for collecting information from others. But its features allow for many more uses in online teaching.

Modularized content

We commonly deliver class content in large blocks, whether they be full articles or videos. But retention does not occur unless learners are able to stop every few minutes during the learning process to reflect on the content. This moves the information from the learners' working memory to their long-term memory. Thus, it is better to break up readings, videos, or other content into five- or 10-minute pieces with some sort of reflection activity thrown in after each segment.

Integrating content and engagement is hard to do in a traditional LMS, which is designed to sequester the engagement into discussion forums. But combining the two is easy with Google Forms. Just split your video into smaller clips, and ask students to answer a question after each clip. Questions can be multiple choice, short answer, or essay. First set up the question in Forms, and then load the video segment into the question as content. The student will need to answer the question after watching each segment before moving on. Forms can also host podcasts, links to websites, text, images, etc.

Once done with the form, student answers are stored in a spreadsheet automatically created in your Google Drive account. You can even

use the free Flubaroo Google Drive extension to automatically grade the responses.

Google Forms is also an ideal way to deliver content in a blended classroom where you do not want all of the trappings of the LMS. Students reach the form directly through a dedicated link that you provide them, which can also be password protected. Plus, you can have the questions delivered one by one, set a time limit for each question, and have the system notify you by email when a submission has come in.

Just split your video into smaller clips, and ask students to answer questions on each clip after watching it.

Surveys

It is important to establish a teaching presence right at the beginning of an online course. Online students can easily feel disconnected, and so teachers should reach out to students early in order to start building rapport. One of the most powerful ways to develop rapport is to ask students about their background, interests, and educational goals. This demonstrates a sincere interest in the students and will go a long way toward cultivating a good class environment.

Forms are a good way to collect the information. Simply set up

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7 >>

<< FROM PAGE 1

the name of the first identity, and this was accompanied by a profile picture of a tulip. The next identity, "Second Reading," was accompanied by the image of a hydrangea, etc. I provided students with the same images in order to streamline the process.

This process took one intense week to implement. On Monday-Tuesday, students posted comments in their First Reading identity; on Wednesday-Thursday, they posted in their Second Reading identity; and on Friday-Saturday, they posted in their Third Reading identity.

Students responded to different types of questions during each read:

First Reading: Identify the main points. What is the central idea?

Second Reading: How is the text organized? What is the purpose? Who is the audience? What are some key vocabulary terms or concepts?

Third Reading: Do you agree with the main idea? Does a concept in this text remind you of something else we read? What are the implications of this text?

Text set strategy

Another strategy is to create a text set, or a set of related texts around a central topic or concept (Boyles, 2014). Each text set created should have an overarching inquiry question to guide student thinking (e.g., How would you define the concept of Literacy in the 21st century?). Readings should be assigned in a logical order so as to build student understanding gradually, methodically, and deeply in relationship to the inquiry question. Through their text discussions, students would be prompted

to go back and forth among texts in order to explore relationships, identify points of comparison and contrast, and integrate ideas. This strategy helps students develop deep knowledge about a topic over time, and encourages students to return to previous readings. It allows faculty to gauge students' deep understanding of a topic over time.

I modified the text set strategy slightly to be in the format of a jigsaw discussion. In this way, students are reading all of the texts in a set, but they are becoming experts in one area. This strategy took three weeks to implement.

One strategy is to have students engage in multiple readings of the same text for different purposes.

Week 1: I introduced my students to the inquiry question and briefly introduced each article. Students had two weeks to read all texts in the text set independently, but they were assigned one text on which they would become the class expert. In small expert groups, students discussed their assigned text. I conducted these discussions on discussion threads, since these seemed to work better for back-and-forth discussion.

Week 2: In their expert groups, students reviewed their discussion threads and summarized key points. Together they created a VoiceThread about their article. The purpose of the VoiceThread was to teach the other students in the class about

the article and to discuss how it related to the guiding question.

Week 3: Students viewed each other's VoiceThreads in order to learn more deeply about the articles they read but were not assigned to develop expertise in. Students commented on each other's work and engaged in discussion and reflection.

Self-monitoring strategy

Finally, a third strategy is to teach students how to self-monitor their understanding during reading and to problem-solve if they cannot extract meaning immediately (Cummins, 2013). A simple way to help students self-monitor is to introduce a coding method. For example, students could place a question mark next to a part of the text they had difficulty understanding and would like you to review, an exclamation point next to information that was new and interesting to them, and a check mark next to information that they initially didn't understand, but upon further reading and discussion they feel they understand. This strategy make students aware of their understanding of the text, focuses discussion around understanding of the text, and provides an assessment tool for faculty.

For this strategy, students can work in small groups or independently. This activity took one week to implement. First, I introduced students to the concept of self-monitoring, and I shared the coding system. Next, I created small groups and shared the reading for the week through a VoiceThread with each group. I asked students to mark up the text using my

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7 >>

What Research Tells Us about Online Discussion

By John Orlando

Student discussion differentiates online education from the old correspondence courses. But there are still many questions to answer in order to facilitate good discussion online. Hong Zhiu, of the University of Texas at San Antonio, did a meta-analysis of studies of online discussion over the past 15 years and has interesting findings about participation. These findings can help instructors maximize the benefits of discussion.

A few students dominate. Studies show that a few students tend to dominate discussion, just as a few people tend to dominate face-to-face discussions. Yet, most students still talk more in an online discussion than in a face-to-face environment, lending evidence to the perception that online education tends to draw shy students out of their shells. This is one major advantage of online education, and a reason why discussion should be central to any online course.

The finding also reminds us that even in an online discussion, equal participation is not likely. While it is important to establish minimum requirements for participation, human nature means that some students will still dominate. In fact, trying to even out participation rates might have undesirable consequences. Requiring too many discussion posts from each student will lead to students posting just to meet the guideline.

While we want students to learn how to express themselves, we might also consider the legitimate role of a “passive participant.” Maybe that person is a good listener, while another who contributes a lot is a poor listener. The online instructor should ask whether the purpose of discussion is to get everyone to talk

or to generate good ideas. If the latter, then craft discussion requirement to allow for discussion supporters who encourage others but do not take a larger role.

Participation between students increases over time. Studies have shown that initial discussion tends to be between faculty and students, but as time goes on, students start talking to one another more and more. This is encouraging, and the goal of an online course is to move the center of gravity of a class from the lecture to the discussion. The design of a traditional classroom with desks facing the instructor embodies the assumption that students are there to listen, and as a result discussion goes through the instructor. But everyone is in an equal position in an online discussion, so students tend to start genuinely speaking to one another.

This does not mean that online instructors should remove themselves entirely from discussion. Students want the instructor to be present, at the very least to demonstrate that students’ points are valued. A good guideline is that an online instructor should foster, but not dominate, discussion. Provide the structure and initial nudge, but hope that it eventually gets taken over by students.

Constructive interactions. A third theme is that the majority of discussion is collaborative and constructive. Researchers found that responses generally contained supportive messages about others’ postings. This is important, as people who do not teach online often assume that students will start flaming on online discussion boards. Flaming is context-dependent. Unlike in other forums, online students are not truly anonymous, and because the instructor holds the grades there is a built-in deterrent to flaming. Studies also show that responses

to others were far more common in discussions than original postings. This again makes sense, as any discussion generally starts with an initial topic and then builds on that. But the finding draws into question the common requirement in online courses that all students make an original posting. This can create multiple discussion threads that are hard to follow. Students will also run out of original ideas after a few postings are made, and turn their “original” postings into unoriginal comments.

Consider the purpose of the original posting requirement. Is it to generate creativity? If so, then a response to someone else’s point might contain more insight and creativity than an original posting. Maybe instead of requiring an original posting and one or two replies to others, just require one or two original thoughts.

The fact that most responses were supportive also raises the question of whether students are too nice in discussion. Some studies suggest that students are unwilling to challenge one another in discussion. Has the focus on acceptance and inclusion in today’s education led students to be hesitant to disagree? The purpose of academic discussion is to model civil and constructive disagreement as a means of intellectual progress, and so an online instructor might deliberately “stir the pot” with postings that invite disagreement as a way to facilitate robust interaction and engagement.

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

<< FROM PAGE 1

radio. Suddenly the person comes alive through their voice.

Whenever possible, online faculty should use rich media instead of text or PowerPoints to deliver content. One option is to combine images with narration in a digital storytelling format. The instructor explains a topic with his or her voice while showing images to illustrate it. A good practice is to provide a five to 10-minute video overview at the beginning of a module to explain why the topics covered are important and what students should get out of it. The video can also be used to warn students about common mistakes to avoid in their assignments. This will help capture the students' attention and put a human face on the course. Take a look at this tutorial on how to make digital storytelling videos on WeVideo: bit.ly/1KyXXHS.

One important thing to remember when recording any audio is to speak naturally. We tend to stiffen up in front of a microphone and speak in a monotone. A robotic tone demonstrates to the listeners that you are just interested in pushing content out to them, not communicating, and it will quickly cause listeners to lose interest. The narration should sound like a conversation.

The best way to avoid a robotic voice is to imagine that you are speaking to a student in your office while you record. It might even help to post a picture of someone on your monitor. You should also force yourself to add voice inflections and emphases to highlight what is important about your topic. It is OK to exaggerate on recordings, as that is essentially what actors do. You are presumably interested in

the material, and so you should demonstrate your excitement through your voice and students will pick up on that enthusiasm.

You can also humanize the content by adding your own experiences. If you are teaching an art in Rome course and have visited Rome, describe your feelings when walking into the places that you are discussing. You might also throw in some amusing stories, such as getting on the wrong train or ordering the wrong food, just to add some additional personalization.

Another good practice is to make a video welcome and bio

When 17,000 students were asked to list the qualities of an effective teacher, “respectful” and “responsive” came out above “knowledgeable.”

to introduce your course right at the beginning. This can either be simple a webcam shot in your office or a digital storytelling narration that uses images from your past. The video establishes a relationship with students immediately, and makes them feel more comfortable to come to you when they are struggling.

Feedback

Students are starved for good feedback from their instructors. They get brief comments simply meant to justify the grade, but not true feedback designed to improve their performance by explaining what they did wrong and what they can do to improve. Providing quality feedback demonstrates your interest in student learning, and students will pick up on that.

In particular, students need feedback on their ideas more than on their writing. Faculty tend to focus on writing issues because writing errors are easy to spot and tend to bother us the most. But an instructor's primary job is to teach his or her subject matter, be it business, philosophy, physics, anthropology, etc., and so subject matter should constitute the bulk of the feedback to the student. Feedback should be thought of as an effort to cultivate student expertise in the subject matter through the instructor sharing his or her expertise. Think about the skills and knowledge that constitute expertise in your field, and focus first on cultivating those through your feedback. Instead of just telling a student that he or she got the procedure wrong on a physics problem, a faculty member can explain how he or she analyzes physics problems to determine the right procedure to use. Students appreciate this feedback, and need it to develop their own expertise.

Another good practice is to start a dialogue with students. You might ask a student a question on an assignment that the student replies to by email or on the next assignment. This demonstrates a genuine concern with reaching students on an intellectual level rather than just stamping a grade on their work.

The effort spent in cultivating rapport with students will be paid back in better student performance, instructor evaluations, and an interesting teaching experience.

Reference

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Rubric Options for Online Class

By John Orlando

Athletes are often “graded out” by their coaches after a game, and they always know ahead of time the exact criteria that will be used to grade them. An offensive lineman knows that he will be graded on the number of sacks allowed, missed blocks, etc. The clear performance criteria allow athletes to focus on meeting them.

Unfortunately, the same is not always true of higher education. As a graduate student, I was taught how to grade students down on essay assignments for various errors. But I was not taught to explain my grading methodology to students ahead of time, so many students’ errors were a result of not knowing what I wanted.

Rubrics are an ideal way to clarify expectations for students. The assessment categories are clearly laid out and the different performance levels within each category demonstrate what constitutes good or bad performance. Rubrics provide students with models of what to do and what to avoid. This helps guide them in developing their work.

Rubrics also make the grading process easier by breaking it down into discrete items. The teacher has a clearer picture of what to look for. Plus, the rubric helps keep the instructor on track after doing a number of assignments. We all wonder about the “grading drift” that causes us to grade harder or easier as we get farther into a pile of assignments. Some instructors will even regrade an earlier assignment at the end to see whether they have drifted. Rubrics limit drift by tethering us to a standard.

But rubrics are also helpful in developing the assessment itself. Faculty normally consider assessments after determining their course

content. But many educational theorists want faculty to reverse this process by first determining how students will be assessed, and then developing content that teaches to those assessments. While the term “teaching to the test” is often used pejoratively, it actually makes perfect sense. If the player will be assessed on how many sacks he gives up, then his training should focus on how not to give up sacks.

Starting with an assessment rubric also helps clarify in the instructor’s mind what he or she wants students to learn, and thus what should be taught. If critical thinking is an important part of the rubric, then the instructor needs to make sure that it is covered in the class. Too often students are graded on general skills like critical thinking without any explicate or related teaching, as if they were to acquire them by osmosis. It is a good exercise to sketch out in a rubric exactly what criteria will be used to grade students, and then compare it to your course content to see whether you cover all of those skills.

Rubric Software

While many faculty build their rubrics in an Excel or Word document, there are a number of free online systems that make the process much easier. These all function in similar ways. Each provides a template in which you define the performance categories as rows and levels of performance within each category as columns, and then fill in the boxes at each intersection of the two.

iRubric (www.rcampus.com/indexrubric.cfm) is a simple and powerful tool from RCampus. One nice feature of the site is that there is a gallery of over 485,000 rubrics made by other teachers that you can use or modify for your own

purposes. I did a search on “digital storytelling” and came up with over 3,000 rubrics, and so there should be something for nearly any purpose. After creating your rubric, you can copy and paste it into a Word document as a table that you then copy onto a student’s work. I like to highlight the boxes that correspond to the student’s performance with a background color after copying the rubric into the assignment to make it clear what determined the student’s grade. If you wish to pay for the premium version, you can enter students into the system and have your choices automatically calculated and graded. For tutorial see (<https://youtu.be/JmNhEelN4o0>).

OrangeSlice (<http://bit.ly/1KUAIxI>) is a free Google Docs add-on that you can incorporate into your Chrome browser. You open a student’s work in Docs, open the rubric, and highlight boxes. OrangeSlice will calculate the scores and provide the student with a grade. This is ideal for faculty having students submit their work in Google Drive.

QuickRubric (www.quickrubric.com) is another simple yet powerful rubric-making tool. It works similarly to iRubric in that it provides a template with columns and rows to fill in. Unlike iRubric, it does not have a gallery of rubrics, but it does have a Tips to Writing a Strong Rubric page that can provide a good guide to getting started with rubrics. Plus, as a stand-alone system without a suite of non-rubric features, it presents a less cluttered page to work on if you are just interested in creating a rubric from scratch.

Try any of these rubric options to improve your grading and students’ performance. @

<< FROM PAGE 2

a survey on Google Forms, send students the link, and ask them to provide information on topics such as:

- Their experience with the class subject
- Their educational goals
- Their experience with online education
- Any struggles they have had with certain types of coursework or online education generally
- Contact information, and best times to contact them

While you may not use all this information during your course, bits and pieces will be helpful in understanding students who are struggling, connecting topics to students' particular experiences, and getting a profile of the class as a whole. I always reply to each

student's response with a welcome message that references some of the information that they provided in that survey.

Formative assessments

Short, ungraded, formative assessments that demonstrate where students are in their learning can be one of the most powerful tools in the teacher's toolbox. Google Forms is an excellent mechanism for facilitating these assessments because they are independent of the course's graded assessments, and this will help put students at ease. Simple quizzes can be used at strategic points throughout the course. They can also include open-ended questions asking students to describe their struggles. These assessments can be anonymous, and the resulting spreadsheet can be used to get an aggregate picture of where the class stands. This can also be an excellent way to do in-class polling in a

flipped or blended classroom.

Teachers in quantitative courses such as math or physics will be interested in the g(Math) add-on for Forms that turns the form into a whiteboard that students can draw on with a tablet or smartphone. This makes it much easier for students to do equations online than using a keyboard.

Checkout list

CheckItOut is a Forms add-on that can be used to create checkout lists. An instructor who wants to choose a topic for a group presentation but does not want more than one group covering the same topic can create a checkout list that strikes off topics as students pick them.

Look at this helpful tutorial by Richard Byrne to set up Google Forms, and consider ways to use Google Forms in your course: [@](https://youtu.be/xUL9j30NYkc)

<< FROM PAGE 3

coding system and audio or video comments. In their comment, I asked them to explain why they chose to use a particular code.

VoiceThread has proven a powerful tool for implementing close reading and analysis strategies in my online courses.

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NEXT MONTH'S TOPICS

Three Common Mistakes to Avoid in Online and Hybrid Teaching

The Role of Questions in Online Teaching

Web Annotations as an Alternative to Discussion Forums

Problem-Based Learning for Heightened Student Engagement

Getting Started with Adaptive Learning

Screencasting Options for Teachers

How to Keep from Going MIA in Your Online Course

By Steve Dwinnells, Ph.D.

As an adjunct professor and one who works daily with faculty in helping them understand online education, I have noticed and heard of increasing numbers of professors going missing in action (MIA) while teaching their online course. This is particularly disturbing since engagement is the number one characteristic that faculty must strive for when teaching from a distance.

Being MIA can take several forms. There is the extreme of providing no communication, feedback, or encouragement to students. In this case, the online course becomes nothing more than a self-directed correspondence course. Another form is when feedback is either not constructive (perhaps an assignment is hurriedly graded) or arrives too late for the student to improve in subsequent assignments. How can students expect a genuine learning experience when the instructor does not provide the guidance and help that is so desperately needed in a timely and beneficial manner? Yet another form of going MIA is lack of presence in interactive assignments such as blogs or discussion boards.

So what can we do?

1. Set times to “go to class.”

I always recommend to my students they imagine their online course as a face-to-face course and to “attend” on a regular basis two, three times a week. The same holds true for the professor. By “going to class,” you can catch up on grading assignments, respond to emails, provide guidance for interactive assignments, and generate meaningful announcements that help keep the students on task. This will also

prevent your own falling behind and becoming discouraged.

2. Find ways to personalize your course with your presence. Include media such as a welcome video at the beginning of the course, or insert media at the start of each module so that the student can see or hear you, and consider video/audio feedback for some assignments. In addition, occasionally include a video or audio segment within your announcement section so once again your students can make connection with more than a computer. How does this help you not go MIA? When you personalize your course, the student will sense your presence repeatedly throughout it, and you will feel more invested in the course and more likely to remain engaged.

3. Seek opportunities to engage students in creative ways. Like any discipline, teaching online is not something one learns overnight. One professor I know writes personalized emails to two or three students a week with nothing more than a positive affirmation of some task the student performed that week. Another professor responds to writing assignments using a self-recorded Adobe Connect session so that the student can see and hear the critique. He finds this produces responses even more quickly than typing out or marking up a written assignment. Use a product such as VoiceThread to respond to discussion board postings—again, this is another way the student feels you are present by virtue of seeing and hearing you.

4. Use discussion boards wisely and often. Despite the calls for instructor-free student discussions, it is wise to intervene regularly,

for several reasons. First, just as in a face-to-face course, you can prevent the session from going off topic. Students can quickly veer off point, but your presence helps keep them focused and on task. Second, students will know that you care about what they are saying. They know you will be looking at their responses—responses that can be praised, critiqued, or called upon for more critical thinking. And finally, by remaining active in a discussion board, you can monitor any inappropriate responses. Your presence will certainly alleviate the fear that you have somehow gone MIA.

5. Remember that online does not mean off-line.

Just because the content, assignments, and assessments are online does not mean that the actual teaching and instructor presence can be off-line. One could have a beautifully designed online course, but with an off-line professor the learning experience will lack the depth, breadth, and richness of a true learning experience. You may not see your students, but that does not mean they do not see you or are not looking for you. Make yourself available through virtual office hours. Once a week, open up a synchronous session using Adobe Connect or a chat function where students may come to talk with you. Better yet, conduct a review session prior to a quiz or exam.

Remember that teaching online is not a spectator activity—it is a participative one!

Steve Dwinnells is director of the e-Campus Instructional Development Center at Eastern Kentucky University. @