

3-1-2011

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### Recommended Citation

Bradt, S. W., & Tackett, S. (2011). Facilitating Online Collaboration and the Development of Digital Communities. *Perspectives In Learning*, 12 (1). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol12/iss1/7>

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## Facilitating Online Collaboration and the Development of Digital Communities

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### Abstract

This discussion focuses on the utility of two unique Web 2.0 tools designed to elicit more interaction among students and to increase learning outcomes while instructing at a distance. While Web 1.0 could be described as that iteration of the World Wide Web that focused simply on making information accessible, the philosophy of Web 2.0 applications is based upon user-centered designs and the proliferation of volunteer collaboration. Fortunately, the explosion of Web 2.0 technologies and social networking platforms have provided a wide array of applications uniquely suited to addressing distance education challenges. We discuss the application of two Web 2.0 technologies, VoiceThread and LibraryThing, believed to support instructors' social presence, learners' engagement, and course learning outcomes.

When facilitating instruction in distance learning environments, instructors are presented with both the usual motivational challenges and those associated with building an interactive community among individuals who may never see each other. Students and teachers alike often experience a sort of culture shock when participating in an online course (Palloff and Pratt, 2003, 2007). Instead of sitting in a shared space, using traditional classroom social protocols, each online participant has a separate, singular space and primarily responds asynchronously to text with text.

Distance learning provides significant benefits for institution, instructor, and student alike. Institutions are able to reach a wider pool of potential students; while both instructors and students benefit from being able to participate from almost anywhere they can get internet access. However, this accessibility and flexibility comes with a price - that of decreased feelings of engagement, interaction and exchange with other people. Michael Moore at the

University of Wisconsin has identified *transactional distance* as a “psychological and communication space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” (Moore, 1997, p. 20). In essence, instructors, designers, and course facilitators are faced with the need to build an atmosphere of interaction and engagement within (or through) an arrangement of technology where students are alone physically and often feel so socially.

Fortunately, the explosion of Web 2.0 technologies and Social Networking platforms has provided a wide array of applications uniquely suited to addressing distance education challenges. Although many definitions exist, the term *Web 2.0* is usually associated with online applications that facilitate the sharing of information through collaboration among individuals and groups. While *Web 1.0* could be described as that iteration of the World Wide Web which focused simply on making information accessible, the philosophy of

Web 2.0 applications is based upon user-centered designs and the proliferation of volunteer collaboration.

As stated by the National Research Council, learners construct knowledge through experiences and interactive engagement (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000). Web 2.0 technologies provide collaborative tools that support: active, dynamic interactions between learners (Shirky, 2008); multiple associations for expansive schema development; and prolonged engagement (repetition) that is necessary for long-term memory (Driscoll, 2000). This discussion focuses on the utility of two unique Web 2.0 tools to elicit more interaction among students as well as increased learning outcomes while instructing at a distance.

### VoiceThread

*VoiceThread* is an online Web 2.0 tool for collaborative work on documents, photos,



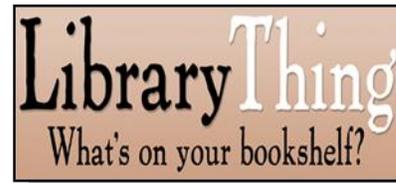
and videos. Found at <http://www.VoiceThread.com>, this variation on “threaded discussions” provides an asynchronous discussion

platform that is different in many respects from those available in online forums and in learning management systems like BlackBoard<sup>®</sup>. Unlike many discussion forums, VoiceThread allows for the upload of documents, photos and video, around which discussions develop in a more visible manner. For example, instructors may upload an article they wish their students to critique or choose a photograph or video that demonstrates a particular type of architectural form. VoiceThread provides a

shared space for an interactive forum where students may draw or write on the screen, record oral comments, and enter text-based comments. The participants may use the program’s embedded drawing tools to highlight anything of interest, or to augment their personal critique. We believe the resulting discussions are a more robust exchange among learners and instructors because of the multiple modes of communication (webcam, phone, VOIP, text, video, image, and drawing) provided by this particular Web 2.0 tool. Therefore, it is plausible to suspect that long-term memory gains (learning) are positively affected. Being able to hear a fellow student’s critique of assessment validity or to view their recorded video response to Moore’s *Utopia* allows the listener to cull more meaning from the commenter’s tone and non-verbal communications.

### LibraryThing

Another online application that may have significant instructional impact is *Library Thing*.



With the ability to host discussion threads, collate

reviews, and allow for customized tagging, LibraryThing can be an excellent resource for facilitating course discourse on selected books/authors/topics. However, it is more than just a sum of its reviews, ratings, and forums. LibraryThing is an online community developed by and for bibliophiles who wish to interact with others that have shared literary interests.

Found at <http://www.LibraryThing.com>, this digital repository aids in the development of educational communities via several important components. First, it allows the

development of a personal profile similar to many social networking sites. In addition to photos and other biographic information, the personal profile also tracks usage, group involvement, what the user is currently reading and other pertinent data. Access to meta-data also contributes to its usefulness for researchers. We recommend you review the “Zeitgeist” pages for interesting data on what the site terms its “vital statistics,” and other statistical categories such as user interests, overall and specific usage (e.g., by author, title). Secondly, it allows for the development of community through the establishment of “connections” with others that have similar interests, or who the user may have ‘met’ through one of the many group forums.

Both of these Web 2.0 applications mentioned in this paper may be thought of as the outgrowth of a new paradigm of information management. *Producers*, as defined by Dr. Bruns (2007), is a paradigm shift in thinking about how information is produced, distributed, and consumed. Where previously there were Producers (such as newspaper reporters) who developed content and then used Distributors (such as newspapers and their networks) to disseminate that content to Consumers (such as individual readers), we now have a system where end users (or consumers) are also their own producers and distributors (Bruns, 2007).

*Producers* are enabled by Web 2.0 technologies to communicate their thoughts to a potentially massive audience, the size of which is measured *by the communities they develop*. Historically only a small group of wealthy information brokers had this capability; but today, through the advent of social networking, individuals have new and unique tools at their disposal for both creating and consuming.

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