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Dynamic Dialogue in Interpreter Education via VoiceThread

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Abstract

This paper provides a glimpse into the use of interactive dialogue to increase and improve interactivity among interpreter education students via VoiceThread. The focus of the paper is primarily drawn from experiences in the education of signed language interpreting students, however, it is also relevant to spoken language interpreting students. While this article aims to explore the use of VoiceThread (also known as MyThread) as a dynamic digital tool to enhance dialogue, the concepts highlighted go beyond tools to demonstrate how improved connectivity and dialogue can serve as a strong foundation for community building in eLearning environments. Both theory and application of the ways in which dynamic dialogue can be integrated will be addressed throughout the paper. Exemplars are provided to guide educators through use and implementation of VoiceThread to improve dialogue in the classroom.

Keywords: discussion, dialogue, pedagogy, technology, online instruction, interpreting, sign language

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses opportunities for increased community connections at a distance for improved social presence via the use of VoiceThread to promote dialogue, knowledge exchange, and reflection in interpreter education. As the demand for interactivity and connection in education rises, so does our need to identify ways to meet this demand with educational technology that supports such an endeavor. The landscape of educational technology has seen a significant evolution over the past decade, with a rise in tools and technologies that support educational experiences (Schmid et al. 2013). These changes appear to provide more meaningful and dynamic experiences for all who participate in the online educational realm (Van Dusen, G.C., 1997). According to the 10th annual report *Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States* on the state of online learning in U.S higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2013), online courses are described as courses in which 80 percent of course content is delivered online. The report states that there has been an increase in distance education programs and student enrollment to online courses since 2002. As of 2013, 32% of all students take at least one online course, which is an increase of over 570,000 students, a total of 6.7 million students. Additionally, 69.1% of chief academic leaders are reporting online learning to be critical to their long-term strategy. Likewise, signed language interpreter education has also seen a rise in online course offerings (Lightfoot, 2015).

According to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID, n.d.) there are five online sign language interpreter education programs listed in the United States. In addition to these fully online programs, many other programs incorporate online learning into their curricula and courses, and some online programs may not yet be listed. Knowing the variety of ways in which online course delivery may occur, it may also be the case that educators at large widely utilize online learning platforms (i.e. Blackboard) by incorporating hybrid or blended approaches to learning. It is within these programs and courses where online technologies are used, that this paper serves to explore innovative approaches to dialogue in digital contexts. Therefore, by examining how the context in which these digital dialogues occur, we can further discuss ways in which educational technology can enhance future digital experiences to create authentic and engaging dialogue.

Bohm (2013) defines 'dialogue' as rooted in the Greek word 'dialogos'. *Dia* meaning 'through' (not 'two') and *logos* meaning 'the word' or 'reason.' He defines dialogue as the "stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us" (Bohm, 2013, p. 2). Bohm proposes dialogues can occur between one or more persons (as one can even dialogue with him or herself); and suggests a dialogue is different from a discussion, as discussions and dialogues are like games- discussions have winners and losers, and dialogues have only winners because it is not a game *against* each other, rather *with* each other. Issacs (1993) believes the purpose of dialogue "is to establish a field of genuine meeting and inquiry- a setting in which people can allow a free flow of meaning and vigorous exploration of the collective background of their thought, their personal predispositions, the nature of their shared attention, and the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions" (p.25). This *free flow of inquiry*, as Isaacs (1993) refers to it, allows for individuals to learn how to think together supporting the adage, "Two heads are better than one." Currently, various learning management software (LMS) systems use the term 'discussion' in reference to boards or forums for students to interact via written posts; we are proposing a

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shift in our discourse from *discussion* to *dialogue* to capture the purpose of fostering collaborative communication exchanges amongst learners.

While definitions of online, hybrid and blended learning may change and evolve; the ways we as educators evolve *with* educational technologies becomes the driving goal for optimized teaching and learning. Miri, David and Uri (2007) assert that in our ever-changing and challenging world students need to develop higher order thinking skills including critical system thinking, decision-making and problem solving. Critical and reflective thinking may aid in the ability to cope with and analyse new situations (Bown, 2013), a very familiar position for professional signed language interpreters. Higher order thinking skills include question-asking skills, problem solving, and decision making capabilities based on a framework of rational thinking (Miri et al. 2007; Ennis 1989; Zoller et al 2000) and are important for interpreting students to develop both practical and critical thinking skills and thus we encourage them to be considered when developing interpreter education curriculum. One approach for educators to support this development is to provide students opportunities to develop their thinking both individually and collaboratively through dialogic community learning.

2. Dialogue to promote learning communities

Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2004) describe a learning community as when community members share experiences, expertise through a discussion (what we propose as interactive dialogue) for the purpose of knowledge discovery, exchange, and creation. With the advances in technology, communities are no longer physically bound to the traditional classroom. Online learning communities shift toward a more social constructivist model of learning they provide learners with the opportunity to own and direct their own learning, and share those (successful and challenging) experiences with their peers (Maor, 2015). Considering how communities can develop and thrive through communicative exchanges (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2012), we believe how dialogue is fostered is critical in creating and establishing a connection between students and teachers within this context.

When dialogue occurs online, it is most confined to a LMS, learning management system, (such as Blackboard or Moodle) which serves as the platform to support the learning environment. These platforms store course materials (e.g. syllabi, course guides, assignment submission etc.) and create a digital environment for interaction between teachers and students. It is with the launch and use of these LMSs that online educators have sought to create virtual learning communities. Ching and Hsu (2013) suggest learning communities promote collaborative learning through social interaction, which can occur using appropriate eLearning applications. Only using eLearning applications within the LMS limits learning opportunities and in many ways are unable to fully meet the needs of learning communities who need a more interactive, visual tool.

The educational strategies we introduce in Section 3 compliment two delivery methods: asynchronous and synchronous. Historically, asynchronous discussion boards (such as Blackboard discussion boards) served as the means in which learners could exchange ideas and provide feedback to one another. The interactions would be primarily text-based (Ching and Hsu, 2013). Abel et al. (2010) describe how the asynchronous communication experience may be advantageous for learners in that they are not required to communicate at specific times as they would in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment. What this may suggest is there may be more time to promote students' thinking and ability to process information and respond accurately. Abel et al. (2010) also suggests that due to the digital nature of LMS forums, information can be safely secured and accessible to users at any point in time. Asynchronous communication to support online learning is supported by various scholars (see: Duffy et al, 1998; Bonk et al, 1998; Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz, 1999; Henson et al. 2003). However, disadvantages have also been reported in the literature. Ching and Hsu (2013) suggest text-based interactions as a predominant communication modality may create difficulties for collaborators because it does not provide a face-to-face learning experience.

Certainly, the embedded text-based forums have their advantages and disadvantages. Rourke and Anderson (2002) found that preference for asynchronous or synchronous discussions depends on the task and that each form is beneficial for online learning. Hence, educators may want to consider those technologies, which strengthen pedagogical practice and improve presentation of course materials that engage learners in activities to achieve

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specific learning outcomes. By confining dialogue to the traditional text-based format, educators may fail to provide opportunities that could expand learning further. For example, in interpreter education for signed language interpreters, visual representation of a written dialogue may be more effective. When considering new approaches, students' technology adoption is also a consideration. New generations of students today are known as millennial students or "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), born between 1982 and 2002 (Wilson and Gerber, 2008). McMahon and Pospisil (2005), claim millennial students prefer 24/7 information connectedness, supporting multitasking and appreciation of the social aspects of learning. The evolution of the traditional written interactions into dynamic and interactive dialogic format may likely meet the expectations and needs of these new generations of students.

2.1. *Dynamic dialogue via VoiceThread*

Voicethread.com is an online educational software tool designed to support interactive collaboration and sharing for enhanced dialogues. VoiceThread allows for interactive group conversations to occur, where comments are collected, shared and stored in one place (voicethread.com, 2015). This tool includes an online media album consisting of over 50 types of media (images, documents, videos etc.) and allows for unlimited users to make comments on the media through a variety of modalities (voice, text, audio files, or video). No software installation or downloading is required to use voicethread.com. There are a few different account options (free to subscription-based) to allow users to select which features best suits their needs. Asynchronous learning on the VoiceThread platform is advantageous to students because it does not require a real-time exchange, which in turn provides students time to prepare and reflect on their responses prior to posting them. Within this tool, the video medium used to post their interactions creates a stronger 'face-to-face' interaction that emulates the beneficial synchronous experience experienced in real-time, enhancing social presence, and strengthening the learning community.

Researchers have been exploring the benefits of using VoiceThread as an educational tool to improve online interactions, as well as the perceptions and attitudes learners have regarding their learning experiences with the tool. McCormack (2010) found that the development and implementation of VoiceThread assignments increase pre-service teachers' reflective response, engagement and Web technology literacy. Augustsson (2010) explored the collaborative and the social interactions of students using VoiceThread in a university course and identified ways in which it supports interaction by showing individual efforts of students (e.g. "task ownership"), while also strengthening students' identification within a group. Additionally Ching and Hsu (2013) suggest learners are more engaged due to the multimedia features of VoiceThread that provides 'face-to-face' interaction, which is unique from text-based interactions. Chan and Pallapu (2012) researched attitudes of 22 undergraduate students using VoiceThread and found that 74% of their learners reported they would recommend VoiceThread to their peers for delivering presentations, and 64% of learners would like to use VoiceThread for future learning activities. Similarly, Kidd (2012) investigated the effect of using VoiceThread as a tool for content delivery and found that learners reported liking the use of VoiceThread and considered it beneficial for learning as well as creating connections with their peers and the instructor. Kidd (2013) also found increased teacher presence when delivering course content in an online course through VoiceThread.

VoiceThread strongly believes that all people should be able to participate in a VoiceThread conversation and, based on this belief, added several accessibility features to ensure accessibility. One example is the way in which the tool includes the option to caption both audio and video files, support universal screen readers and refreshable braille. Within the field of signed languages and interpreting, a variety of communities are also leveraging VoiceThread as a tool for dynamic dialogue including, Gallaudet University who has adopted VoiceThread, which is renamed, Mythread, as a tool for learners and educators alike (see Image 1, mythread.gallaudet.edu). Since Gallaudet University serves primarily deaf and hard of hearing students who communicate predominantly in American Sign Language (Gallaudet University, 2015) Mythread has become a viable option for learning and teaching.

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(Image 1: mythread.gallaudet.edu - http://www.gallaudet.edu/gts/tool_box/mythread.html)

Through this technology, course materials are presented visually where learners are able to engage and interact with the content using American Sign Language. This creates a platform unique to many learners who use a visual language to communicate since historically discussion platforms were limited to print-based modality. Considering the complex features made available to the users of VoiceThread and its strong support for Universal Design for Learning (Examples 5.1 National Center on Universal Design for Learning, n.d.) and access, VoiceThread has become a uniquely effective learning tool for teaching sign language and sign language interpreting.

3. Community and Technology Converge

Pacansky-Brock (2013) reported students see four major benefits of using VoiceThread over traditional online forums. These benefits included increased social presence, fostering of a “community” feeling, ability to post visual concepts, and better understanding of communication nuances. Dynamic dialogue can take many forms. The suggestions below are merely a sample of the great potential for how dynamic dialogue can occur using VoiceThread. These examples aim to ignite thinking around ways to transition from a traditional linear approach in online interactions via written posts to interactive dialogue-based assignments and assessments. VoiceThread can be used in a variety of ways within the interpreting classroom and this paper hopes to serve as a springboard for future use where exploration amongst sign language interpreter educators may continue to evolve. To do this, we have compiled a list of exemplars we have either used or observed in action.

Table 1: Applications for VoiceThread in the Interpreting Classroom

Task	Application
Introductions	<p><i>Objective:</i> To establish a social presence and connection from the start of the course.</p> <p><i>In Action:</i> Using VoiceThread for interactive video introductions, you and students can get to know each other by posting introductions using either audio or video feature. Upload your introduction and students can upload their video introduction.</p>
Lecture/Group Dialogue	<p><i>Objective:</i> To provide students with the opportunity to comment and post questions regarding the lecture.</p> <p><i>In Action:</i> If the lecture is housed separately in the LMS from the text-based forum, students may not be able to post questions and comments directly to</p>

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	<p>lecture. Consider dividing your recorded lectures into shorter segments (15 minutes or less) posting each section individually on VoiceThread. Students can then engage with the lecture in manageable sections leaving room for comments and questions, which are available to you and their peers for lecture related dialogue.</p>
Reflection	<p><i>Objective:</i> To encourage students to move beyond standard answers like ‘I agree’ and open the dialogue for collaborative reflection and diversified thinking.</p> <p><i>In Action:</i> Create a first slide in VoiceThread that poses a question for students to post a response such as <i>What did you find most insightful from the readings?</i> On a second slide, have each student respond to a minimum of two others’ original response posts. On the third slide, create an optional slide where students may respond to posts from the previous (second) slide. This application may incorporate reflection techniques by asking students to relate, connect and apply to real life experiences and/or potential situations.</p>
Student projects (Spoken/Signed Presentations)	<p><i>Objective:</i> To provide a forum for delivery (presentation) of projects and solicit peer feedback.</p> <p><i>In Action:</i> Create a slide for each student. Students can provide a slide or image, prior to the creation of the full VoiceThread that represents their work. After creating the VoiceThread to post, students can comment on their personalized slide. After students post their presentations to their slide, others may respond and provide direct feedback on their slide.</p>
Interpreting practice	<p><i>Objective:</i> To provide students with the opportunity to interpret manageable chunks for consecutive interpreting practice.</p> <p><i>In Action:</i> Divide the source text into sections and post the source text chunks to a series of VoiceThread slides. VoiceThread allows for video to be posted for analyses on one slide. In the form of a comment, have students record their interpretations specific to that chunk. Create a slide at the end for students to reflect on their work as well as reviewing their peers’ work. Note: the work produced is public for others in the class to see and should be made explicit to students from the start of the activity.</p>

4. Conclusion

With the emergence of engaging and interactive online tools, so do the opportunities for educators to advance their teaching practice, and more specifically, promote engaging dialogue among students. This article outlined the many ways in which discussion can evolve into dynamic dialogue online using VoiceThread in interpreter

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education. As mentioned there are several platforms serving as the foundation for learning to occur, and we suggest VoiceThread is just one of many tools that provide educators with the ability to promote engaging dialogue. According to Isaacs (1993) "...dialogue seeks to have people learn how to think together-not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem, but in the sense of surfacing fundamental assumptions and gaining insight into why they arise..." (p. 26). When students can discuss and think about and engage with the work they do in the classroom, the aim then becomes how we can foster that thinking to transfer from practice to their professional work.

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