Summary

Kathryn Lowe, Section Leader, Preparation for Life and Work has introduced a web-based application called VoiceThread to a group of 12 Photography and Film making students who have learning difficulties and disabilities. VoiceThread is a presentation tool that is accessible for all learners to view and comment on each other’s work. It was introduced as part of a project to make a promotional presentation on what the college is like for prospective learners. This has improved the learners’ communication skills, boosted their confidence, and given them a platform to share their voice.

Taking photographs of the college for the VoiceThread project
About Epping Forest College

Based in Loughton, Essex, approximately 2,500 learners study at Epping Forest College each year. Students are able to complete A-Levels, vocational courses and apprenticeships in a variety of subjects from ICT to brickwork, and from performing arts to business studies.

The challenge

The Photography and Film group was introduced into the curriculum in the 2012-13 academic year, and is non-accredited. Kathryn’s initial plan was to spend half of the year getting learners familiar with a camera and creating portfolios, with the second part of the year focused on producing a film made by the learners. Kathryn and her team also hoped that the class would build the learners’ confidence through using technology and presenting their work to others.

“Before we introduced VoiceThread there wasn’t any technology that we had that could capture the learners’ point of view. There wasn’t a platform for learners to tell other people about the college.” Kathryn Lowe, Section Leader, Preparation for Life and Work

Kathryn was very keen to promote her department around the college and throughout the region. She believed that the most effective way to promote the college would be through the voices of the learners, so she began searching for the right technology so her learners could make a promotional presentation.

“I'm not tech savvy, but I'm always looking for new things to try out. Trying to find the right technology so the learners would be heard, that they would have something to show off that had a purpose and was meaningful was a massive motivation.” Kathryn Lowe, Section Leader, Preparation for Life and Work
As the Photography and Film group is quite large with four, one-to-one carers, and 20 people in the classroom, it used to be difficult for learners to be heard amongst the group. It appeared to Kathryn that the chances to develop individuals’ communication and choice making skills might be missed.

**The activity**

Kathryn attended an educational transition event in September 2012 and noticed that many schools and colleges were not using technology to promote their offers. This inspired her to start thinking about a promotional presentation made by the learners, which could showcase the college via a tablet or laptop at different events.

“I thought, technology is out there so why are people taking laminated photos and publications around. Why aren’t they pressing a button and seeing a student speak about why they love the college, saying isn’t it great.” Kathryn Lowe, Section Leader, Preparation for Life and Work

Kathryn discussed her idea with the Epping Forest College Head of e-Learning and Innovation, Vikki Liogier, who then invited her to take part in the Jisc TechDis Ambassadors project in November 2012.
Jisc TechDis, and mentor, Lilian Soon, assisted Kathryn in finding accessible technology for the purpose of the project. The learners trialled different technologies and VoiceThread was by far the most suitable.

“\textit{It meant that the project could be led by the learners’ decisions and the promotional piece could be created totally by them, using their photography and filmmaking skills. We made a presentation using VoiceThread and the effects were amazing.}” Kathryn Lowe, Section Leader, Preparation for Life and Work

Once VoiceThread was chosen for the project, the learners picked subjects to photograph and created storyboards. They would split into groups, take photos and share them to decide on the best to use.
The learners telling prospective students what security is like at the college

They were put onto VoiceThread and the learners would then record the commentary to tell prospective learners about the college. They could also comment on each other’s work, if the photo needed to be re-taken or an explanation needed to be refined.

Every decision on the project was made by the students to reassure newcomers of what they could expect if they were to join Epping Forest College. This was to minimise the anxiety that some of these students might feel.

The students wanted to talk about their experience in the college, and for them details and guidance about security, the reception, the street, canteen and library were very important.

The outcomes

“As a result of VoiceThread, and the work of my learners, my department now has a promotional presentation that will be taken with me to transition events and shown to prospective learners.” Kathryn Lowe, Section Leader, Preparation for Life and Work
VoiceThread has enabled learners to share work and ideas, capture comments via text, speech, webcam and doodle. It has made feedback extremely easy and enabled learners to make individual choices in how the project moved forward and what was in the promotional presentation.

It was developed and led by the learners, and every learner could see through the final presentation, how they had contributed, and how their skills had developed throughout the project.

As a result of using VoiceThread learners have benefited in a variety of ways:

- They've developed their social and communication skills.
- Grown in confidence through a sense of achievement.
- They've felt empowered through being able to make decisions and voice their opinions.
- It's enabled them to self and peer assess - If what they recorded or presented was not good enough they wanted to do it again.
- They've learnt how to use different software and hardware.

The learners’ social and communication skills have increased using VoiceThread
The learners have given their feedback regarding the use of VoiceThread:

“Everyone could give their opinion.”

“I love using VoiceThread, it works to make life easier.”

“I would like to use VoiceThread even more.”

Through using VoiceThread and other web software, Kathryn and her team have learnt to not be wary of technology, which has in turn motivated them all to discuss and try out other technologies.

Staff can also access VoiceThread from home, which meant they could log-in day or night, type, or speak into their webcams to give learners feedback and assessment.

“The benefits of VoiceThread have been tremendous. First of all, the learners just loved it, they were enthused, and felt valued. They could see each bit being built, and it gave them the chance to self-review as they were working on it. They knew that they were creating the presentation for new students and didn’t want to let them down. Their self-confidence has increased quite enormously, using new skills, talking, making big efforts in speaking clearly at a normal pace, and expressing their ideas so they could be perceived by others. It’s exactly what a successful project should look like.” Vikki Liogier, Head of e-Learning and Innovation

The impact

Learners recording their commentary for their VoiceThread project
Since the completion of the Ambassadors project, Kathryn’s learners have used VoiceThread to articulate their voices for a student reps meeting.

During rep meetings in the past, Kathryn’s learners found the meetings daunting.

They realized that rather than one student being present in the actual meeting, they could use VoiceThread to capture all of the learners’ voices.

It was very successful, as the learners knew they were being videoed, they had really thought about what they wanted to say in the meetings.

The impact of VoiceThread has also spread outside of the college. The department invited teachers and professionals from schools and colleges to a showcase event during the springtime.

They invited everyone to watch the VoiceThread presentations telling would-be pupils what the department does, so Kathryn and her team are hopeful that they can attract more students to enrol in the future.

Kathryn and her team now hope that other departments around the college can benefit from using VoiceThread to promote learner voice in the future.

“One of the reasons why we began the project in the first place was because we wanted to promote the learner voice. We have achieved that but we want to improve on that, and show the rest of the college how we’ve promoted learner voice.” Kathryn Lowe, Section Leader, Preparation for Life and Work

As a result of her work with VoiceThread, Kathryn and her team won an award from Jisc TechDis for best e-practice project in the South-East, and were also highly commended by LSIS for their imaginative approaches to learner voice.
The lessons learned

Kathryn explained that although VoiceThread is free to use, its free account has limitations on the amount of slides and pictures you can use in presentations. As a result she advises users to really focus on what is essential for each presentation.

Apart from this minor barrier, she would advise users to have fun and play around with VoiceThread, explaining that if you have any problems just persist with your goals, as it’s very easy to use.

Useful links

- [Epping Forest College Photography and Video class VoiceThread promotional presentation](#)
- [Video case study – Jisc TechDis Ambassadors Project](#)

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