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Using VoiceThread as an Ice Breaker Assignment

One of the issues with online pedagogy is truly knowing and identifying who your students are. The students are in an analogous situation. As instructors, we are supplied with a list of names, id numbers, etc., but very little about the individual. The students probably know very little about the instructor other than what they see on Rate My Professor or social media. How can the instructor effectively get to know more about their students and vice-versa?

In my online class, everyone has an opportunity to learn about their classmates and instructor. A quick way to accomplish this is through VoiceThread. My week 1 ice breaker assignment is creating a VoiceThread where I introduce myself in about a 2 minute video. I talk about my education, work experience and interests outside of academia. Having a video and talking to the students creates a presence that makes the students feel more relaxed. This in turn engenders a classroom atmosphere.

Once the students watch my introductory video, they are required to make a video comment. This video comment requires that they introduce themselves, their background, major, work experience, outside interests, etc. This is a good way for the students to test VoiceThread using their technology. It also allows those students who may not be comfortable speaking in front of a camera to break out of their comfort zone. Since VoiceThread is used for many more assignments during the course, this is a great way to get started and make certain everything works as expected.

The next task of the assignment is for each of the classmates to listen to their classmate's video comment. The students are then required to reply to one of the video comments using either a video or voice comment. What I truly appreciate is how this creates a connection among the students that other otherwise couldn't happen. I have seen classmates who have been in prior classes' together, work in the same industry, live in the same town, etc.

Below is a screenshot of my one slide introductory video and those students who have commented

Once students complete this assignment they are ready for future VoiceThreads including any project that involves group work. When teams need to be made up, the students already have a good sense of who their peers are. There is no random guesswork in choosing their groups. Everyone has a true personality.

Using VoiceThread for this introductory assignment generates a great experience among the students. They really feel part of the class and are more engaged in the course as a result. The physical limitations that are hindering an online course can be removed by creating a virtual presence.

About the Author: Curtis Izen is a senior information associate and VoiceThread Certified Educator. Curtis adjuncts online and face to face courses at Baruch College and the School of Professional Studies at the City University of New York. Curtis is passionate on bringing new philosophies and technology into the curriculum. He is a 2 time recipient of the Presidential Excellence Award for Distinguished Teaching and Pedagogy at Baruch College.