

# Digitally Speaking | Voicethread

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## Using Voicethread for Digital Conversations

Beginning with email and instant messages and stretching to texting and synchronous video web conferencing, digital dialogue has gradually become a common element of everyday life for today's students—another opportunity to “gather.” The kinds of personal relationships shaped on the playground in an earlier era are now developed in MySpace and Facebook. While the format may be different, the purpose remains the same: Our students are crafting identities and are driven to connect.

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## Unrelenting Desire to Interact

This innate and unrelenting desire to interact was probably best defined Danah Boyd—a PhD student at the University of California-Berkeley studying the networks developing between digital youth—in [a 2008 blog post](#) when she wrote:

*School is one of the few times when they can get together with their friends and they use every unscheduled moment to socialize - passing time, when the teacher's back is turned, lunch, bathroom breaks, etc. They are desperately craving an opportunity to connect with their friends; not surprisingly, their use of anything that enables socialization while at school is deeply desired.*

Boyd goes on to explain the positive role that social networking services can play in the natural growth of a child's individuality:

*Their value is about the kinds of informal social learning that is required for maturation - understanding your community, learning the communicate with others, working through status games, building and maintaining friendships, working through personal values, etc. All too often we underestimate these processes because, traditionally, they have happened so naturally.*

*Yet, what's odd about today's youth culture is that we've systematically taken away the opportunities for socialization. And yet we wonder why our kids are so immature compared to kids from other cultures. Social network sites are popular because youth are trying to take back the right to be social, even if it has to happen in interstitial ways. We need to recognize that not all learning is about book learning - brains mature through experience, including social experiences. (Boyd)*

Sounds a lot like your own students, doesn't it!

They're working diligently to "take back the right to be social," aren't they? They've sent thousands of instant messages and texts. They have personal web pages and blogs. They play online versions of video games with "partners" thousands of miles away. They spend hours behind a computer screen, plugged into an iPod or talking to someone on their cell phones.

This drive to connect provides a unique opportunity for school teachers: Incredibly high levels of student motivation paired with a predefined fluency with electronic communication tools. Interacting on the Internet has become second-nature to tweens and teens. It is a language that they have shown a willingness to embrace and an ability to master. Matching this motivation and fluency with required elements of the curriculum would likely be an exciting—and successful—first step into digital waters.

One tool that can help educators to do just that [is Voicethread](#).

## What is Voicethread?

One of the best free tools available to teachers and students who are learning with the world rather than about the world is Voicethread. Known as a "group audio blog," Voicethread allows users to record text and audio comments about uploaded images. Voicethread has two distinct advantages for classrooms that are communicating and collaborating across counties, countries or continents:

1. **Voicethread is Asynchronous:** That means users can work on and enjoy Voicethread presentations at any time--even if their "partners" are sleeping a million miles away!
2. **Voicethread is Engaging:** Let's face it--sometimes working with digital partners can be pretty boring. After all, email and discussion boards are nothing more than written text. Voicethread gives users something interesting to talk about---pictures! What's more, being able to actually hear one another makes digital communication through Voicethread much more personal.

Recently, Bill Ferriter explained how Voicethread has become a natural part of his classroom instruction [in this article in Edutopia Magazine](#).

Curious about what a Voicethread presentation can look like when created by kids? Then check out this presentation about Denmark being developed by a group of students somewhere in

Cyberspace that has been viewed nearly 2,000 times and that includes over 130 comments:

## Planning a Voicethread

Once you've created an account and a collection of identities for students to use while commenting on a Voicethread, it's time to create your first presentation. Begin by carefully selecting a topic that will promote conversation and debate between students—and that can be conveyed through images currently available to you.

Possible topics include:

- *What can you learn about the values of a country or a culture by studying images?*
- *Is Global Warming having an impact on our world?*
- *Has urbanization helped or harmed our community?*
- *Where can evidence of math be found in our daily lives?*
- *Is graffiti a form of artistic expression or simply vandalism?*
- *Who are heroes?*

After collecting a series of images that represent your topic, carefully script out short opening comments for each image that include a question for viewers to consider. Scripting comments prior to recording will allow you to organize your thinking—and your images—in a logical order. This early organization will save time as you produce your final product.

Initial comments should be somewhere between 1 and 3 sentences long. Longer comments will discourage viewers from adding their own thoughts—and tend to bore viewers quickly! Remember that your goal is to promote conversation, not to lecture through pictures. If you find yourself recording longer initial comments, you probably have images that aren't very interesting.

Consider this sample comment, taken from the Denmark Voicethread referenced in the opening of this training guide:

*"What do you notice in this picture taken outside the train station in Copenhagen—the capital of Denmark?"*

## Commenting Tips for Voicethreaders

The best Voicethreads are truly interactive—with users listening and responding to one another. They are super interesting digital conversations! Highly accomplished Voicethreaders are constantly thinking while interacting with a Voicethread presentation. They come to the conversation with an open mind, willing to reconsider their own positions—and willing to challenge the notions of others.

Voicethreading requires users to develop the skills that active thinkers bring to any learning experience. Some of the best tips about active thinking have been developed over time by teachers like Kelly Gallagher and Matt Copeland—who have each written books about reading and writing in middle and high schools. They've also been developed by an organization called Project CRISS—Creating Independence through Student Owned Strategies.

The following tips for Voicethreaders are adapted from the collective work of Gallagher, Copeland and Project CRISS:

To be an active Voicethreader, start by carefully working your way through a presentation. While viewing pictures and listening to the comments that have been added by other users, you should:

1. **Gather Facts:** Jot down things that are interesting and new to you
2. **Make Connections:** Relate and compare things you are viewing and hearing to things that you already know.
3. **Ask Questions:** What about the comments and presentation is confusing to you? What don't you understand? How will you find the answer? Remember that there will ALWAYS be questions in an active thinker's mind!
4. **Give Opinions:** Make judgments about what you are viewing and hearing. Do you agree? Do you disagree? Like? Dislike? Do you support or oppose anything that you have heard or seen? Why?

Use the following sentence starters to shape your thoughts and comments while viewing or participating in Voicethread presentations. Comments based on these kinds of statements make Voicethreads interactive and engaging.

- This reminds me of...
- This is similar to...
- I wonder...
- I realized...
- I noticed...
- You can relate this to...
- I'd like to know...
- I'm surprised that...
- If I were \_\_\_\_\_, I would \_\_\_\_\_
- If \_\_\_\_\_ then \_\_\_\_\_
- Although it seems...
- I'm not sure that...

While commenting, try to respond directly to other viewers. Begin by quoting some part of the comment that you are responding to help other listeners know what it is that has caught your attention. Then, explain your own thinking in a few short sentences. Elaboration is important when you're trying to make a point. Finally, finish your comment with a question that other listeners can reply to. Questions help to keep digital conversations going!

When responding to another viewer, don't be afraid to disagree with something that they have said. Challenging the thinking of another viewer will help them to reconsider their own thinking—and will force you to be able to explain yours! Just be sure to disagree agreeably—impolite people are rarely influential.

If your thinking gets challenged by another viewer in a Voicethread, don't be offended. Listen to your peers, consider their positions and decide whether or not you agree with them. You might discover that they've got good ideas you hadn't thought about. Either way, be sure to respond—let your challengers know how their ideas have influenced you.

## Sample Strand of Comments

Here's a sample strand of comments from a Voicethread exploring political cartoons related to the genocide in Darfur. You can download a copy of this strand of conversation in handout form here: [What Can Digital Conversation Look Like.doc](#)



**Big Bird:** Look at this political cartoon. You can see that the man is writing down the things that need to be fixed or solved. I think the author is trying to tell us that America has a lot of problems. Also look on the shirt. It has a lot of useless problems more than the big problems around the world.

**Billy Burrito:** *I think that big bird is right because on his shirt he has a lot of useless and pointless jobs like save his SUV. So there kinda saying that the genocide in Darfur isn't a problem and that we don't need to help them. Do you think that we should help Darfur with there Genocide?*

**Drama Queen:** *I partly disagree with you Billy. These may sound like dumb things to do, but that is what the average person has to usually think about. (Save maybe, the illegal nanny).For example, think about your parents. What do they worry about? Gas prices, taxes, bills? These things sound pretty dumb, but you have to worry about these things in order for YOU to survive!*

*But I think the people represent the USA, and all they are doing to help. Which is nothing. Nothing, but asking about Darfur. People in the US of A are trying to survive in the world themselves, and except for an occasional thought about world issues.*

*But SHOULD we care?*

**Pooh Bear:** *I partly disagree with Big Bird because the things written on the mans shirt are not all useless problems for America, they are average problems for the world.*

*I do think, though, that the author thinks that these things are useless problems. Or why did he make the man and women look useless themselves?*

*The women says "What about Darfur?" I think that the author was trying to say that American people are only caring about themselves instead of Darfur, not that they are caring about stupid things instead of Darfur. What do you think?*

**Drama Queen:** *Pooh Bear I agreed with you on that these problems are typical but save New Orleans and save our troops are important not typical. Take New Orleans,after Hurricane Katrina New Orleans was gone and still it needs more help almost 3 years later. Our troops need help too. we've lost so many people there and the families who have a family member in Iraq are devastated so most are typical.*

*I think that the author is trying to say that most Americans think that their problems are more important and few like the woman care about real problems like the genocide in Darfur.*

**Mental Muffin:** *i agree with billy burrito because all of the information he put on his shirt is useless. i also wonder if one of th reasons he put useless information on his shirt because of his body shape. i also think the author is saying that we shouldn't do anything about the genocide because the guy in the political cartoon says he doesn't have and more room but he probably could of wrote something on the back of his shirt about Darfur.*

**Jake the Snake:** *Well I agree that some of these ideas are useless but not when he says "save the troops" that is a serious topic that we are dealing with today. It's also a huge topic being discussed in our presidential elections. Or what about all of the families that got hit by hurricane Katrina? Do you really think those people have it as good as we do? So do you really think these ideas are dumb to think about?*

**Vlad the Impaler:** *Listen Billy B and Drama Brat I'm in the neutral zone between you two. Drama girl says "well we need these stuff to survive ( forgetting illegal nanny) so stuff this Darfur Genocide . Billy says Americans are too greedy and selfish with themselves .*

*I really don't know what to think . Is it our job to care about the worlds problems around us or the government? Why should we care? Is worrying about our affairs too greedy ?Should we care about theworld a little more than we do now ? Does the world care about us the same?*

**Horse Freak:** *I also agree with billy, why should we be worrying about our problems when there are helpless people in Darfur who are dying every day!! To me were being selfish i know we have to worry about things like taxes, jobs and cars, but those are such small things compared to genocide!!*

*What do you think are we selfish and don't know how well we have it? Should we complain less and help more just in case the problem is reverse and its happening in our country?*

## Sample Voicethreads

### The Power of Professional Conversations

[This Voicethread](#)---using quotes from leading writers on professional learning communities---shows the role that Voicethread presentations can play in the conversations between members of a professional learning team. The asynchronous and semi anonymous nature of Voicethread presentations can make conversations safe between faculty members.

### Wondering about Web 2.0

[This Voicethread](#)---used to stimulate discussion about the nature of highly accomplished teaching with technology between members of a 21st Century learning team---is another example of how Voicethread can play an integral role in professional development efforts at the school or district level.

## What Role Should Creativity Play?

[This Voicethread---created by Voicethread Founder Steve Muth](#) and focusing on the role that creativity should play in education---will be used as a focal point of the March 13 MEGA Presentation. Take some time to view the Ted Talk by Sir Ken Robinson and then jump into the conversation about creativity in education. What role should it play? What role does it currently play? What changes must we make to education to make creativity a bigger part of what we do? What barriers must we tackle before creativity takes center stage in teaching and learning?

## **Sudan Political Cartoons**

[This Voicethread engages students](#) in a conversation around the genocide currently occurring in Darfur by studying political cartoons related to the issue:

## **The Cultural Photograph**

This Voicethread engages students in a study [of culture of the countries of Southern Europe](#).

## Why Do People Hate?

[This Voicethread](#)---which generated over 150 comments from participating students---was a joint online seminar between a class of sixth graders and a class of eighth graders. Notice the way that students challenge one another's thinking. Also notice that teachers emphasized articulation through writing by requiring that students use the text commenting feature of Voicethread.

## **Welcome to Our World**

[This Voicethread is an open project](#) being created by a collection of global teachers. If you're interested in more information, contact Bill Ferriter: wferriter [at] wcpss [dot] net

## **Additional Voicethread Presentations**

One active Voicethread classroom---and the presentations that they are creating---can be found at this Voicethread homepage:

<http://plugusin.ed.voicethread.com>

## **Voicethread Handouts**

Ferriter has created a collection of handouts that teachers can use to structure their classroom work with Voicethread. They include:

### **Voicethread Overview**

[Handout\\_Voicethread.doc](#)

This document includes a general overview of Voicethread that covers much of the information found on this wiki page. It also covers the basic steps for creating and managing a Voicethread presentation.

### **Previewing a Voicethread**

[Handout\\_Voicethread\\_Previewing.doc](#)

This handout can be used by students while previewing Voicethread presentations.

### **Commenting on a Voicethread**

[Handout\\_Voicethread\\_Commenting.doc](#)

This handout contains basic information on the kinds of comments that can be added to a Voicethread presentation.

## **The Cultural Photograph**

[Handout, The Cultural Photograph.doc](#)

This handout was created for use with Ferriter's Cultural Photograph project, shown in the sample Voicethread presentations section above.

## **Welcome to Our World**

[Handout, Welcome to Our World.doc](#)

This handout was created to introduce Ferriter's Welcome to Our World project, shown in the sample Voicethread presentations section above.

## **Sources for Images**

The following websites are excellent sources of images for Voicethread presentations:

### **Trek Earth**

<http://www.trekearth.com/>

As described on the Trek Earth website: "The underlying theme of TrekEarth is learning more about the world through photography. TrekEarth fosters this by allowing photographers to display their work grouped by regions in a supportive and orderly environment. This is accomplished by an easy-to-use system which encourages people to critique each other's work. Integrated with this system are [forums](#) designed to encourage discussion about specific photos, countries, and general topics."

## **Cagle Cartoons**

<http://cagle.msnbc.com/>

One of the most interesting uses for Voicethread has been to engage students in conversations around political cartoons. The images are interesting to students---and are great ways to teach students about bias and hidden messages. This website is a terrific source of political cartoons from around the world. The images are categorized by topic and the artists are categorized by country. If you decide to work with political cartoons, consider sharing images from artists in different countries who have different perspectives about the same issue.

## **The Library of Congress Print Reading Room**

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>

Recognizing the changing nature of new media, the Library of Congress is working to make as many images as possible available to users in a digital format. This link connects to the Library of Congress's Print Reading Room, which contains almost a million digital images. What makes these images particularly valuable is that they are grouped into user-friendly categories like "People," "History," and "The Environment."

## **NASA's Image Gallery**

<http://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/imagegallery/index.html>

One governmental agency that takes remarkable pictures is NASA...and we shouldn't be surprised! Heck, they've got some serious cameras in some seriously amazing places, don't they? This link connects to NASA's image gallery, which contains thousands of pictures that your children will find fascinating. With a few clicks of the mouse, you'll be able to find shots of stars, planets and space craft that will spark your imagination---and (like all images taken by government organizations), these pictures are a part of the common domain and not subject to copyright protections.

## Wikimedia

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)

Utter the word Wikipedia in most schools and you'll be met with grumbles, won't you? Most teachers see Wikipedia---the free online encyclopedia maintained by thousands of Internet users---as the root of all digital evil! "It's unreliable!" we cry. "You can't trust the content that you find there." And while some of those arguments may be true, Wikipedia users are some of the most open content creators in the world. Wikimedia connects to a collection of images and videos posted in Wikipedia that are often copyright free---or free for use in most situations with nothing more than a citation of the original source. This site will introduce you to the Wikimedia collection, which is sorted by category and nothing short of impressive.

## Citing Images

As a Voicethread users, you're going to need to "get good" at citing images, aren't you? After all, images are going to form the basis of the majority of your projects---and images often have the same copyright protections that text holds.

Luckily, Voicethread makes citing images easy. First, each image that is imported into Voicethread can be tagged with a title and a weblink. This allows users to include a direct link to any image that they've retrieved online. More importantly, however, Voicethread allows users to upload documents to their strands of conversation as well. That means that users can create a "Works Cited" page in a word processing application and upload it at the end of their Voicethread presentations.

Here's a sample of a Works Cited page for a Voicethread presentation on Sudan:

[Sudan\\_Images.doc](#)

And here's a PDF created by the University of Cincinnati that outlines the rules for citing images:

[CitingImages\\_PDF\\_000.pdf](#)

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