

## VoiceThreads: Extending the Classroom with Interactive Multimedia Albums

Encourage student participation with accessible and engaging digital discussions.

by [Laila Weir](#)  
April 16, 2008

Bill Ferriter knew his sixth-grade language arts and social studies students spent time online outside of class, surfing the Web and instant messaging. So when he discovered he could engage his kids online in a collaborative, multimedia slide show called a [VoiceThread](#) [1], he decided to see if he could use it to, as he puts it, "steal some of their online minutes."

"The answer was a resounding yes," says the teacher at Salem Middle School, in Salem, North Carolina.

VoiceThreads might best be described as interactive media albums. They are essentially online slide shows of images, documents, or videos that enable viewers to comment on any slide (or at any point in the video) by typing, recording an audio or video comment, or drawing on the image itself. Teachers have been early adopters of the easy-to-learn technology, which has led the company to launch [Ed.VoiceThread.com](#) [2], a secure site just for educators and their students, says VoiceThreads cofounder Ben Papell.

Over the course of his first year using the application, Ferriter posted VoiceThreads about a variety of topics online, encouraging students to comment on them voluntarily on their own time. He got dozens -- even hundreds -- of comments on each. It was a revelation. "I can basically extend my classroom," he says.

Visit one of Ferriter's threads, and you can click through a series of images surrounded by numerous small boxes. Each small box displays the chosen icon of a student (say, Big Bird or Homer Simpson) and represents a comment by that student. The comments play in turn -- some are in audio form but appear as text that pops up in a bubble long enough to be read before disappearing to make way for the next comment. Often, a temporary drawing appears superimposed on the main image, where the commenter has circled or underlined a particular feature of the image. These doodles, as they're called, fade out as the student's comment finishes.

In one [thread](#) [3], Ferriter posted cartoons about civil conflict in Darfur. Around these, the students' comments evolved into a thoughtful discussion of values and international intervention. "I think we would like to help, but the thing is we cant or we dont know how because Darfur is locking out United Nations," commented one student, only slightly ungrammatically.

"I mean if we went to Darfur to try and stop the genocide wouldn't the Janjaweed think we want to go to war. then our troops would have to leave Iraq and go to Darfur," responded another, "but more importantly haven't enough people died in the genocide we really don't need anymore people to die."

## Banishing Timidity, Boosting Participation

Ferriter says more students participate more actively in digital discussions than in the classroom. "You don't have to be the loud one or the popular one," he points out. When he asked his students about their online involvement, he said they cited the sense of safety: "They can think about their comments beforehand." They also liked the fact that any VoiceThread has multiple conversations going on at once. "In a classroom conversation, there's generally one strand of conversation going at any one time, and if you're bored by that particular strand, you're completely disengaged," says Ferriter.

The teacher exploits the students' enthusiasm by pushing them to engage in free writing, an activity he thinks is too often overlooked. "Because it's so motivating to the kids already, they're willing to do those bits of writing I could probably never get them to do in class," he says. "If I asked them, 'Take out a piece of paper and do some writing about your thoughts on the Sudan, or injustice,' I probably wouldn't get much." Yet his VoiceThread on the Darfur conflict drew sixty-plus comments from thirty-six of his fifty-three students.

All VoiceThread participation is voluntary for Ferriter's students, but he links the topics to their classroom studies. Ferriter introduced VoiceThreads with [lessons on how to comment effectively and thoughtfully](#) [4], emphasizing what he calls "collaborative conversation."

"I would teach that exact same kind of language even in face-to-face conversation," he says. While a thread is active, he brings up one of the posted comments in class each day, asking the students to consider it and evaluate what makes for a good or bad comment.

## Easy to Use, but Start Small

Teachers can keep VoiceThreads private or publish them, either on the VoiceThread site or embedded on their own sites. Participants can post from anywhere, at any time, making it easy to involve groups in disparate time zones, or even different countries, in a single conversation.

The technology is particularly accessible because viewers can comment using just about any technology -- including a good old landline. "We've tried to make it fairly universal in access," says Ben Papell. "If you don't have a microphone on your computer, you can use a telephone to comment. If you're in the classroom and don't have either, you can use text if you need to, or webcam commenting."

It's also easy to learn the basics of VoiceThread. [Tutorials](#) [5] on the site help newbies get started or explain more advanced features, such as video doodling -- pausing a video and drawing on the frozen image like a sportscaster commenting on a play.

For educators new to VoiceThread, it's a good idea to experiment a bit before starting with students. VoiceThread offers free educator accounts on its public site. Teachers can begin there, commenting on others' threads and creating their own practice threads.

When a teacher is ready, he or she can use a free account to create VoiceThreads for or with students, or they can migrate over to the Ed.VoiceThread site. "Use it, experiment with it, figure out how it's going to suit your needs," advises Papell. The educator site costs money -- classroom or school subscriptions are available -- but it's secure and private and should pass even stringent school Web filters.

"Take it slow -- don't upload 600 images and try to get fifty people to comment on each and every one," he says. "One of the great things is that it will take off on its own."

**Laila Weir is a contributing writer for *Edutopia.org* who lives in Santiago, Chile.**

## Weaving Threads on the Web: Useful Resources for Online Interaction

### Ed.VoiceThread.com

Browse the library of [teacher-created VoiceThreads](#) [6] on the VoiceThread educator's site for ideas and inspiration.

### Digitally Speaking

This [wiki](#) [7] created by teacher Bill Ferriter explains everything you need to know to get started -- and has several sample VoiceThreads.

### The Tempered Radical

Ferriter's [blog](#) [4] links to two handouts he uses to guide students to post thoughtful comments.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.edutopia.org/voicethread-interactive-multimedia-albums>

### Links:

- [1] <http://voicethread.com>
- [2] <http://www.ed.voicethread.com>
- [3] <http://digitallyspeaking.pbwiki.com/Voicethread#SudanPoliticalCartoons>
- [4] [http://teacherleaders.typepad.com/the\\_tempered\\_radical/2007/11/using-voicethre.html](http://teacherleaders.typepad.com/the_tempered_radical/2007/11/using-voicethre.html)
- [5] <http://VoiceThread.com/#c28>
- [6] <http://ed.VoiceThread.com/#q>
- [7] <http://digitallyspeaking.pbwiki.com/Voicethread>

Copyright 2008 The George Lucas Educational Foundation  
Reprint Policy: <http://www.edutopia.org/reprint-policies>  
Privacy Policy: <http://www.edutopia.org/privacy-policy>