CGLC Tech Tips: Social Learning Platforms (VoiceThread and Flip)[1]

I. Scenario

Dr. Ehrhardt teaches a class called Topics in Greek History: Athenian Democracy twice a week. During class she wants her students to listen to her lecture about the major archaeological sites of Greece from the Bronze Age through the Classical Period. She also wants to ensure that her students learn about the development of Greek material culture and its relationship to Greek history. However, because class only meets twice a week she struggles to find enough time to cover all of the material. Additionally, she would like to provide her students opportunities to actively interact with the sources they use in class, as well as offer her students more chances to discuss topics with one another. One way she could do this is by utilizing social learning platforms. While there are many social learning Platforms on the market (360Learning and LearnUpon), this guide will focus on those platforms which are used primarily in higher education: VoiceThread and Flip.

II. What are Social Learning Platforms?

Social learning platforms are pedagogical tools built around social learning helping students learn from each other and learn observationally through modeling from others (Wind 1). Social learning platforms enable learners to communicate and collaborate with each other outside of the classroom more readily. Additionally, they create a learning community in which students can feel acknowledged as an individual despite the lack of face-to-face interaction. Some of the key features included in most social learning platforms include peer review, discussion boards, group work, social media-like features allowing users to upload, or post, their work for others to see and comment on, allowing them to take ownership over their work and interact with the work of other users. Furthermore, cohort courses are what provide users the opportunity to collaborate with one another and students to work through the curriculum of courses together at the same time (Wilde 1). This style of learning allows social learning platforms to mimic the traditional education at universities outside of the classroom.

III. Different Social Learning Platforms

A. VoiceThread

Developed by the University of North Carolina, *VoiceThread* is a media aggregator that allows students to post media artifacts (PowerPoints, PDFs, documents videos etc.) for community feedback. Students can add comments via microphone, webcam, keyboard or telephone.

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(Educause 1). The platform can be used on all standard web browsers and mobile devices. What sets *VoiceThread* apart from other platforms is the ease with which video commentary can be added by both the student and the instructor. The ability for the students to add annotations is what distinguishes the platform from other commonly used educational technology tools such as Canvas Studio. The *VoiceThread* interface uses a thumbnail image (either the user's initials or a photograph) to identify the annotation on the artifact. Once the VoiceThread (VT)[2] is created, users can create shared links and add it to a Canvas assignment or embed the VT on a Canvas page.

This tool is extremely effective for practicing the goals being assessed this year, particularly interpretive listening and speaking as *VoiceThread* allows students and instructors to annotate on Powerpoints, Google Slides and other media with videos and audio comments. The software allows for two modes: "moderated VTs" and "non moderated VTs". The moderated voicethreads means that instructors can determine which VTs the students should respond to. In that sense, it is a good tool for assessment. However, non moderated VTs permit students to respond to each other as well as to the instructor. Moreover, depending on whether the instructor wants to pursue an instructor license or a site license, VoiceThread does permit Canvas integration. However, even without full Canvas integration, instructors can still share VoiceThreads with students either via a share link or by embedding the VoiceThread onto a Canvas page. VoiceThread offers an extensive series of webinars and workshops on the different features that their platform offers.

With that said, we can also highlight a number of weaknesses. For example, if an instructor chooses to incorporate film clips from a source such as Vimeo or YouTube, those clips have to be publically available and not hidden behind a firewall. The pricing plans can be quite expensive depending on the capabilities you want. Additionally, while they do offer very extensive webinars and tutorials, their customer support is through email only (although their response time is generally quite good).

B. Flip

Flip (previously FlipGrid) is a Microsoft application for both web browsers and mobile devices that allow students to create video presentations and asynchronous discussions. It functions as a concise message board where students or instructors can add 90 second videos or 240 character responses to a grid of discussion questions. Similar to *VoiceThread,* they do host a blog which contains example flips and offers tutorials. However, their corpus of resources is not as extensive as that of *VoiceThread*. With that said, as distinct from *VoiceThread,* there are a number of advantages to Flip over VoiceThread, namely that they offer age specific resources for busy teachers and it is also a free tool which does allow for Canvas integration. Additionally, the

[2] For the sake of clarity, when we abbreviate VoiceThread, VT, we are referring to the product created by the platform *VoiceThread*. When we use the term *VoiceThread*, we are referring to the platform or the company itself.

amount of technical support that they offer is comparable but different. While VoiceThread only responds to questions via email, the technical support offered by Flip is more personalized.

IV. Conclusion: What are the advantages and disadvantages of these technologies as a whole?

The advantages of these social learning platforms are their accessibility; most students have smartphones, computers, or laptops of their own to accommodate these applications. If they do not have access to the appropriate technology, they can use the desktops in the CGLC, Grasselli Library, as well as several other locations around campus. Another advantage to social learning platforms is the flexibility that it provides professors in designing their lesson plans and what type of material they would like to introduce to their students. Additionally, these platforms allow students to interact with media, which promotes intercultural competence that cannot be met by simply meeting for a lecture once a week. Social learning platforms, such as VoiceThread or Flip, assist professors in ensuring that their students are reaching the aimed learning goals of the course and the department by providing them with learning opportunities outside of the classroom. Furthermore, these social learning platforms can be utilized in language classrooms, creating more opportunities for students to practice the language and communicate with their classmates.

A possible disadvantage to social learning platforms in general is that there may be a learning curve when students are initially introduced to the platform. In other words, students may need to become familiar with the platform before fully understanding it, so they may experience some difficulty when first using the platform. Moreover, there is no way for a professor to directly oversee their students while using social learning platforms outside of the classroom; therefore, cheating is a possibility.

V. Where can I find out more?

Instructors are more than welcome to consult with CGLC Staff to discuss how service learning platforms can be used with your students. The Coordinator is also more than happy to come in for a classroom demonstration as well.

VoiceThread and Flip also have extensive tutorial libraries which instructors can consult. Here are simply a few relevant to our objectives and also to spur ideas about the different platforms. Please note that as VoiceThread was designed more for the college classroom while Flip is designed for K-12 education, their tutorials are more specific.

Teaching Languages with VoiceThread
Game Based Learning with VoiceThread
VoiceThread and Storytelling
Using VoiceThread for Student Portfolios

Tricks and Tutorials from Flip
Educator Toolkit from Flip