Did you know there is a "new kid" on the block among today’s telephone services companies worldwide? Internet telephone companies have created a new type of software, referred to as Voice over Internet Protocol or Voice over IP (VoIP), that carries voice signals over the Internet instead of over a typical phone line; and it is already being used in some college classrooms.

Professor Steve Sloan, who teaches at San Jose State University, uses a VoIP software called Skype in his classroom. He says: "Skype is more than a program; it is a global communications and collaboration platform. It is also a pipe into a flat world where easy communications is a strategic advantage and the loss of which is a disadvantage" [sic].

Access to VoIP is FREE of charge and available to anyone who wants to place a call anytime, anywhere in the world for as long as one wants to talk.

To access VoIP, you only need a computer with Internet access, a microphone and some PC speakers. The free software is available from: GloPhone, Gizmo, BuddyTalk, Wengo, etc.

First, download and install your chosen software. Then just launch the program and complete the setup process, which includes opening an account, choosing a username and, of course, choosing yourself a password. You are then ready to make some calls. Of course, the persons you are calling must also have the same VoIP software installed on their computers.

You can even create an address book to call your friends and family in a few seconds. Just click on their name, and it will start ringing.

Most VoIP companies offer both free software and free unlimited service.

Many VoIP programs let you select multiple users for conference calls, which can come in very handy in business and education. With some providers you can also integrate other Internet services, including video conversation, message or data file exchange in parallel with the conversation, managing address books and passing information regarding who else is available online when you are.

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New Era in Communication

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There are a few potential problems, though. For example, broadband connections may have less than desirable quality. IP packets may be lost or delayed in the network between users with a momentary drop-out of voice, especially in highly congested networks; but more recently, reliability and voice quality have improved.

Some VoIP solutions are not even encrypted, making it relatively easy to eavesdrop on VoIP calls and even change their content; so make sure you inform yourself about encryption before choosing VoIP software.

University administrators at San Jose State University, University of Santa Barbara and, also, California State University at Dominguez Hills are quite concerned about the consumption of bandwidth by Skype and its detrimental impact on connectivity. As a result, these campuses banned Skype use except in their dormitories and residences. These universities still permit the use of Gizmo or Wengo applications on their campuses, though, due to smaller bandwidth use. Not all of the professors at these campuses agree with the ban.

Personally, I regularly use Skype to talk to family members who do not live nearby. We all have WebCam video cameras (manufactured by Creative) installed on our computers to see each other while conversing. The system is very easy to use and reliable. It is really comforting to see your distant loved ones “live” while you talk to them for as long as you want and for free! The maximum number of participants for conference calls when using Skype seems to be four. I really would not want to live without this technology anymore.

You might ask, how can this specific technology be applied to
Community and Camaraderie: Blackboard’s Discussion Board

Corinna L. Evett

Looking for an additional way to strengthen the sense of community in your classroom? Trying to figure out a way to encourage your shy students to participate more? Needing more time to finish or continue an excellent conversation in class? If so, then Blackboard’s Discussion Board is the tool for you. From my own experience, I’ve found that this resource benefits my classroom communities on a variety of levels.

For those of you who aren’t aware of what Blackboard’s Discussion Board is like, it is set up much like a chat room or blog found on many websites. In the Discussion Board, you and your students can reply to existing “threads” (conversations) or start new “threads.” As your site’s “administrator,” you can determine the number and type of Forums (chat rooms) that you have in your discussion board. For my classes, I have three forums established for three different purposes, and each produces excellent results in and outside of the classroom.

The first forum I have established is The Student Union. This is the area where my students and I continue or start conversations pertaining to in-class discussions. If we run out of time in class, I’ll post a question in this forum from which the students can read and respond. Sometimes, I’ll post a question that will guide us into our class discussion for an upcoming class. Also, students will continue the discussion on their own by posting their own perspectives and ideas. I find that the students who rarely speak in class feel more comfortable sharing their insights in The Student Union. Therefore, it’s a place for people to participate in the learning community on a level that brings them even more comfort and security. Furthermore, in this section, students are asked to practice their writing by using complete sentences and practicing their grammar and punctuation.

RESOURCES:


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skills. When they respond to my comments or to each other’s, they are asked to give original responses, not simply “me too,” “ditto, or “I agree.” As a result, students have another place to practice their writing and thinking skills in a familiar venue for most.

As many of us have experienced, if one student has a question, there’s at least one other student with the same question. Therefore, I have set up the Curious Cat Forum. This is the place for students to ask questions. It is also the place for other students in the class to provide the answers. Even though I encourage students to help one another (we are a community, after all), I do monitor this forum closely so that no one is misinformed. Fortunately, many of the student responses to questions have been favorable and accurate. As a result, with this forum, students become more active participants in the learning process as they take responsibility to seek and provide answers.

Cyber Café is the last forum that I’ve set up for my Discussion Board. Even though my students participate (even on their own) in The Student Union and in Curious Cat, this is the forum that sees the most action. This forum is all about the students: what their hopes, goals, interests, frustrations, and passions are. I also encourage them to share their music, movie, television, art, literature, and their museum tastes here. I tell them that the possibilities of conversations here are as varied as the facets of their personalities. I also encourage them to write whatever they feel like writing about in whatever form they choose to write it (as long they say nice things about me). They can use their text messaging, instant messaging, and MySpace lingo all they want here. Every semester, I am amazed because they do. In one of my former literature classes of 19 students, there were over 80 posts where students shared their academic, personal, and professional goals and interests. Also, students uploaded and shared their artwork, their creative writing, their pictures of loved ones, and even photos of their pets. What’s more, after having a cyber conversation in the Cyber Café, when it came to class time, students were excited to meet one another and continue that conversation face to face before and after class.

Even though there are so many benefits to utilizing Blackboard’s Discussion Board, I have to be honest with you. It can be a lot of work, especially when you have students who love to be online. If I want to participate in the community, I have to keep up with the threads of conversation, and it’s time consuming to respond to their answers in The Student Union, their questions in Curious Cat, and their interesting (and entertaining) communication in the Cyber Café for each online class. However, when I walk into the classroom and students are discussing their posts from all three forums as well as participating more in the classroom discussions because of the increased sense of community and camaraderie, I consider it time well spent.

Web 2.0 - Part Two

Review has new content daily. Your class of bloggers submit their blogs at irregular times; and your favorite web page might not post new content for weeks. Once you set up your RSS subscriptions, all of these get delivered right to your computer and are ready for you to view via MS Outlook or in a specialized aggregator, such as Mozilla Thunderbird.

The process of subscribing is easy but can be confusing at first. For a quick tutorial go to: http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/help/HA102200751033.aspx