Facilitating a Structured Controversy Using VoiceThread

This article describes one course coordinator’s experience using the Web-based application VoiceThread (2012) to facilitate a structured controversy as the student project in a senior nursing course. The purpose of the project was threefold: to explore the impact of illness through sociocultural, psychological, economic, ethical, and legal lenses; to foster collaborative learning; and to develop inquiry skills. Vygotsky’s social development theory provided the framework for the project (Doolittle, 1995).

In structured controversy, students construct arguments to defend a given proposition (Billings & Halstead, 2009). The process requires the use of inquiry skills to search for evidence that can prove or refute the issue under consideration. As controversial issues do not have a right or wrong answer (Bull, 2007), students must use reasoned judgment to reach a consensus agreement concerning the given proposition. The steps in structured controversy are (a) presenting the initial position, (b) rebutting the opposing group’s position, (c) reversing perspectives, and (d) reaching a consensus agreement.

VoiceThread (2012) is a Web-based application that enables users to share images, videos, and voice recordings using a phone, microphone, computer keyboard, or webcam. Participants can also embed the discussion in other Web sites or export it to a multimedia device (VoiceThread, 2012). The facilitator moderates the discussion asynchronously, allowing for more flexible and convenient student discussions. VoiceThread differs from a threaded discussion in several ways. For example, participants can insert their oral and written comments directly to the multimedia. The feature is known as doodling. Navigating the discussion area interface is easier than in a traditional discussion board. The selected media (e.g., PowerPoint®, image, video clip, document) is in the center and as the students participate, their pictures appear around the border like a frame.

For the structured controversy, the students formed small groups consisting of five members each. Each group selected a topic from a list given by the course coordinator. The topics included emergency medical treatment of terrorists, use of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), renal transplantation for HIV-positive patients, HPV vaccination for adolescent girls, and screening and treatment of tuberculosis in undocumented immigrants. These topics were directly related to the course objectives and provided an opportunity to incorporate curricular threads such as cultural knowledge, social justice, and political awareness.

To identify each discussion forum posted to VoiceThread, the course coordinator used pictures representing each topic (e.g., a person receiving ECT, medical personnel providing care to a suspected terrorist). The discussion was organized using a debate format, with two groups per topic. As the project progressed, the course coordinator used questioning and simplifying to scaffold learning. In the first step, each group posted its initial position, one group in favor of it and one group against it. In the second step, each group presented evidence to rebut the opposite group’s argument. In the third step, the students reversed perspectives, and in the fourth step, opposing groups synthesized and evaluated the best arguments from both points of view to reach a consensus agreement. Each group was required to complete a new step at least every 3 weeks. As part of the guidelines, all groups had to explain the rationale for maintaining or changing their initial position. All groups recorded a 2-minute video to post each argument by the given deadline. The ongoing discussion consisted of text, audio, or video recordings that students posted asynchronously throughout the duration of the project. The course coordinator created a holistic rubric to provide the students with specific guidelines and to evaluate their performance. The use of multimedia suited the learning styles of all students and promoted active participation. VoiceThread was best suited for the structured controversy project because all of the interaction between groups occurred from the same interface. In addition, it facilitated bookmarking arguable points directly in the media to discuss in subsequent rounds of the debate. Overall, students’ evaluations of the project were positive.

References


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The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise. doi:10.3928/01484834-20131119-12