

On the Internet

Who's in charge here? WiZiQ and Elluminate

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A recent Women of Web 2.0 webcast <http://www.edtechtalk.com/WomenofWeb2.0/> (and subsequent podcast, on the Worldbridges EdTechTalk channel <http://www.edtechtalk.com>) discussed the hottest Web 2.0 applications these days (obvious grist for an On the Internet column editor). Honorable mention went to NetVibes <<http://www.netvibes.com>>, VoiceThread <<http://voicethread.com>>, and WiZiQ <<http://www.wiziq.com>>, among others.

WiZiQ currently has recently generated much interest on Webheads and Learning with Computers, two email lists with around 1000 technology-using educators interacting constantly in dozens of email messages each day (message archives viewable online or via RSS feeds from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/ and <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/learningwithcomputers/>, respectively), and it's also a popular topic in the edublogosphere. It was featured as one of Robin Good's Online Collaboration Tools And Resources: Kolabora Picks n.48, April 23, 2007: http://www.kolabora.com/news/2007/04/23/online_collaboration_tools_and_resources.htm

For a quick overview of WiZiQ, there are slick promotional videos on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YtyocPzlcU and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVln4C4_hXo. What WiZiQ is and why is it so popular with tech-crunching educators is what I have been reflecting on recently, in conjunction with the critical issue in education of who exactly is in charge here?.

WiZiQ features

First I should explain that WiZiQ is free presentation software working entirely online, requires no download to your computer, and allows you to interact in text, audio, and video with other participants in a common virtual space. The space contains a whiteboard with powerful drawing tools, which users can turn into multiple whiteboards, and upload PowerPoint slide shows to one or more of them. The slide shows are hosted more or less permanently at WiZiQ where they can be searched on by content, tags, or groupings, a feature reminiscent of Slideshare <<http://www.slideshare.net>>. Users can converse synchronously in full duplex, and if the moderator has elected to enable webcams, he or she can select one to display

from participants who have theirs on (in which case, the moderator's camera will either occupy the video space or display in a small corner of it when other webcams are on display). On the down side, though URLs can be posted to the text chat, there is no web tour; i.e. ability for all participants to see where the moderator is browsing as s/he surfs online.

All sessions are automatically recorded and are available at the URL where the session was hosted. Sessions can be created by anyone registered with WiZiQ and anyone registered can attend any other session to which they have been invited. The system is similar to Skypecasting, where any registered Skype user can start one, and only registered Skype users are able to attend, which seems not out of the ordinary in the case of Skype, since you need the software on your computer and a Skype ID to skype (the verb) someone anyway.

WiZiQ takes advantage of registration in a way not exploited by Skype, however. WiZiQ has set itself up as a social networking site. Users can update their profiles with concepts they are interested in (i.e. tags) and presumably this will help link up users with common interests, though at time of deadline, we haven't seen how a tag which many users share evolves into a more formal 'group'. The system does allow members to create and join groups, and to form networks of associations between users. For example, if you set up a session, you can choose to invite everyone in your group or limit the invitation to selected members in your network and they will all receive a message which not only informs them of your session, but to which they can conveniently reply. This is a feature that seems to work well with WiZiQ, though I *have* received messages from people I didn't realize I was networked with. WiZiQ is clearly a work in progress, under development, and as with other social networking sites, many of the features become apparent only after extensive usage and interaction.

One reason that WiZiQ has attracted so much attention is that educators are always on the lookout for free tools that promote synchronous interaction coupled with information dissemination within a network, especially one that lends itself to a formal venue, such as a class or a 'presentation' online. WiZiQ is the first product of its kind to emerge since the recent DimDim effort <http://www.dimdim.com>, a similar, and open source, project which somehow seems to have receded from the periscope views of the instructor networks mentioned above. In that project, network members such as Moira Hunter had been working closely with the developer of DimDim. In the case of WiZiQ, the developer Harman Singh, appears to be similarly approachable, and responds personally to feedback from users. He does point out that "WiZiQ, although free is not an open source application [where] anyone can write code for the application and as with Linux it becomes intellectual property for anyone to be used, free of charge. We are more like Facebook in that case. We do intend to open WiZiQ platform through APIs so that developers can develop their products using our APIs like the other successful applications like Facebook and Blackboard with their Building Block have done." Of further interest to educators, plans are to integrate WiZiQ with Moodle in such a way that live interactive sessions can be started and replayed within Moodle, and scheduled through the Moodle block system.

Contrast with a similar product, Elluminate

Preferences vary, but one popular choice of an integrated set of online presentation tools has been Elluminate <http://www.illuminate.com>. Although Elluminate is not free, it is often used for free by educators when they participate in sponsored or funded online conferences or sessions, or work through a community like Learning Times <http://www.learningtimes.org>, which has provided free access to an Elluminate "Meeting Room" on its left sidebar for years. Learning Times has also been gracious in providing access to Elluminate meeting rooms for individuals and events which in turn provide educational services for free. For example, they have donated their services as sponsors of two WiAOC Conferences: <http://wiaoc.org>. Elluminate itself has just started offering free 'rooms' to educators, though each is limited to three participants: <http://illuminate.com/vroom/>.

Elluminate has proven to be a very robust platform despite being heavy on the front end at low bandwidths (it checks to see if the most recent version is on your computer and takes time to install the latest if necessary. It also checks three proxies--your browser, Java, and Elluminate itself--which must all be set correctly, but which you would notice *only* if trying to connect from behind a firewall). Once connected, it generally works pretty well. It's cross platform and fairly intuitive to use, which is to say that in practice almost no one complains of problems figuring out how to use it. The room will have been assigned a URL, but once this is given out, guests can enter the room with or without a moderator present. The moderator can assign other moderators to share power, and can remove those privileges as easily. The moderator can also withhold from individuals the right to use mics or webcams (normally granted by default in the implementations I've encountered). Speech in Elluminate used to work only one direction at a time, but this is appropriate to many interactive settings, since it imposes a turn taking order (and the moderator can 'take back' the mic in case a participant neglects to relinquish it). The latest version 8 has full duplex for up to 4 speakers if the moderator chooses to enable that feature.

It's good that moderators have that option because full duplex can result in feedback when participants don't wear headphones (moderators in full-duplex environments are always having to troubleshoot that one). Also delays in packet transmission with full duplex can result in participants appearing rude by interrupting other speakers, when because of the delay they are responding at appropriate junctures though others have moved on in the conversation. We have also experienced this when attempting guitar jams online; fun, but impossible to synch up.

Whereas only one webcam can be shown at a time, as long as the moderator has allowed it, participants can self-select to broadcast whenever the cam spot is available, and a preview mode allows for preening prior to going prime time. Participants also have access to a whiteboard onto which they can superimpose text, paint graphics, or image files from their personal disk drives, and a moderator can upload PowerPoint or other prepared materials, and can drive web tours in such a way that all participants visit the same URLs. Elluminate also allows moderators to share applications; for example, a browser window. This differs from a web tour because with application sharing, the moderator can scroll and all participant windows will scroll as well.

Unlike WiZiQ where recording occurs automatically, Elluminate provides the option of making a recording or not, and when activated the recording is hosted on Elluminate servers, where it can be played back by anyone with access to the URL. As

with WiZiQ, if there is a way to save a copy to a personal computer, I am not aware of it. However, some users make Camtasia versions of recorded sessions which can serve as personal archives or be hosted privately <<http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp>>, and TechSmith has released the slightly outdated version 3 of Camtasia Studio as a free download from: <http://www.downloadsquad.com/2007/11/22/techsmith-offers-free-camtasia-studio-do> (specifically, download the trial version and then register it for free; forum traffic suggests that this version doesn't work with Vista.) Camstudio, the open source version of Camtasia, should work just as well <<http://camstudio.org>>.

Control issues

Elluminate lends itself well to a variety of styles of presentation. It works well with informal groupings where people just want to meet and discuss while sharing collaborative resources, and it works well for people who want to make more formal presentations but open participation to more audience interaction during or after the presentation. In my experience I have never thought it necessary to restrict anyone's access to the tools while moderating a session, though I have attended sessions where moderators have preferred to lock it down and force participants to request attention before being granted access to the mic once the moderator had notified them that such requests would be attended to (when the moderator has wished to restrict access during the presentation itself). Elluminate allows participants to raise hand icons to request attention, to clap hands, present a thumbs up or down, and control various other emoticons and graphical whiteboard icons as well, again assuming these have been allowed by the moderator. Elluminate, in other words, works well for moderators who wish to encourage peer to peer collaboration throughout a session, as well as for moderators who feel the stakes are high enough for them to exercise enough control to enable them to stage-manage an event.

However, what I have been reflecting on with regard to these two applications--WiZiQ and Elluminate--is not so much the descriptive differences between them, but the philosophical ones, the assumptions behind what a presenter's purpose would be which must have driven design of each system. What particularly interests me is WiZiQ's approach, so different from that of Elluminate, to the role of the presenter/moderator. Two other differences have been mentioned and are not really part of my reflection, though each is an important crucial difference in its own right. These are the fact that WiZiQ is free and is being developed obviously in hopes of attracting a following, and presumably feedback such as I am providing here, and secondly its social networking features, very interesting, but not a focus of this review.

A WiZiQ session develops very differently to an Elluminate one. First of all, the moderator must schedule a session, as is the right of anyone who has registered with WiZiQ beforehand. At this stage the moderator must choose to enable the webcam feature for the upcoming session in addition to voice. The moderator can schedule any amount of time for the session up to two hours (and once in the session, the moderator can top up the session with more time if needed). Elluminate sessions can be scheduled as well, but it is also possible to simply set up the space with no time restrictions on entry to it. And with Elluminate, decision to use webcams or not can be made while in the session--it is not necessary to decide beforehand.

The role of the moderator in WiZiQ is very different from that of the moderator of an Elluminate session. Most crucially, in a WiZiQ session, the moderator must be pro-active in driving the interaction from the point of appearing on time for the session to begin with. Let's say the moderator has scheduled the session for noon, and has invited a number of participants from his or her network. Those people will receive an email saying that the session begins at noon, and no one, not even the moderator, can enter the session before then. The moderator is then in a position of having to upload materials to the whiteboard with participants present who have been informed that the session was to begin at noon. One way to avoid this would be to not invite anyone from the moderator's network, so there would be no system-generated emails, and the moderator might then invite participants through a separate network to arrive for a presentation set to begin at 12:30, or whenever the moderator expects to be ready. However, this would obviate benefits inherent in the social network features, so what is needed here is the ability of the moderator to get in beforehand and set up the session.

WiZiQ allows for fully duplex voice chat, as you get with Skypecasts, which start similarly to a WiZiQ session. WiZiQ at least deals with one problem with Skypecasts--in WiZiQ participants arrive muted until granted permission to speak. This is both bane and boon, boon to the moderator who is the sole participant who is able to speak until he or she decides to start granting others the mic, and bane in case the moderator is not there for whatever reason. In that case participants can text chat, but there would be no one available to allow them to talk. With Elluminate, it should be recalled that participants who gather at a working Elluminate room will be fully voice empowered unless a moderator arrives who wishes to switch them off.

Because of the option to have one-person-speaking-at-a-time functionality, Elluminate users need not encounter the problems faced by users of Skype and WiZiQ when everyone is able to talk at once--these issues being background noise, feedback, and delay. With Elluminate, it might also be recalled that users in general need little or no training in order to participate, but with Skype and WiZiQ considerable time and effort often has to be expended on mic etiquette. Users of duplex synchronous voice chat tools need to wear headsets so that their mics don't pick up what others are saying from the speakers and feed it back into the voice stream with delay, giving an echo effect that can disrupt speech in the person trying to speak. In worst cases, this can cause high-volume whine until the offending user self-mutes or is muted. Similarly when participants are in an area with loud background noise, they need to mute their mics when not speaking so that the noise doesn't distort the conversation being played to everyone else.

If the moderator has to deal with sound issues while trying to present, this increases task load, so a course of least resistance for moderators is to simply leave the default settings in place, so that everyone but the moderator is muted. The moderator then opens up one mic at a time in response to a hand raised, the icon provided for participants to get attention. Similarly, if the moderator has activated webcams for the session, then the moderator's webcam will appear from the moment it is switched on, but for others to have the cam, the moderator must select that person and pass webcam control to him or her. If the moderator is on the ball, this might be a good way to ensure that anyone who is speaking is pictured while speaking, but then the moderator would be taking on an additional role of director or puppeteer, constantly switching between speakers and webcams by granting the appropriate privileges at

just the right juncture in the presentation.

Another odd thing happens in WiZiQ when the moderator grants voice permission, and that is that permission to use a microphone brings with it permission to have moderator control over whiteboards, including the option to create new ones and toggle from one to another. It's hard to second guess the developers of the product on this one, but the ramifications are several-fold. In particular, the moderator cannot grant many participants microphone privilege without a corresponding increasing in chance of chaos occurring with whatever presentation materials are on the screen. If the moderator stopped on a particular slide for example and invited comment and then threw the floor open to all participants, all participants might start seeing the slides and whiteboard changing without anyone knowing who was making the changes, and when the moderator regained control there might be a few whiteboards more than when the chaos started.

So it must have been assumed in designing this that the moderator would not think to do this. In our experiments with this system we have found that the moderator would be in any event unwise to un-mute all mics due to the sound issues mentioned earlier, so the WiZiQ system seems to have been designed with a less flexible view of how a moderator might want to conduct a session than that allowed by Elluminate.

This may run counter to the intent of the WiZiQ developers. According to Harman Singh, in personal e-mail communication, WiZiQ was designed on an "underlying assumption of an un-controlled environment. By un-controlled we mean where the learning is cultivated in a self-motivated environment complying with the class etiquettes of a real-world classroom i.e. teacher delivering the lecture in a chaos-free setting where learners value every moment spent with the teacher." If that is the intent, then it is hoped that this review can assist with attenuating aspects of this latest version of the program with potential for introducing chaos.

Recommendations

What then must a moderator do in order to make an effective presentation in WiZiQ, and what would a group do in order to hold an effective brainstorming session in WiZiQ? These are important questions to raise at this time, while WiZiQ and perhaps other similar products are under development, and while the developers are still in a position to respond to feedback from the educational community.

In its present rendition, WiZiQ is designed for a moderator who is comfortable taking control. In practice, that moderator is kept a bit busy to be both moderator and presenter. There are a lot of balls to juggle, trying to sort out the duplex audio issues, manage the webcams, plus toggle the whiteboards, in addition to making a presentation which entails conversation with participants. Even in Elluminate, where moderation is not quite so hands on, moderators find it convenient to work in tandem, one person presenting and another handling the back channels. This is possible in Elluminate because one moderator can appoint another (but is not yet an option in WiZiQ). It might be wise for WiZiQ to go the same route, and provide this option to the main moderator. Also, it would help to allow moderators finer control over privileges, instead of bundling such a wide set of privileges with anyone who is able to use a microphone.

So to answer the first question above, to make an effective presentation in WiZiQ, the moderator needs to keep control of it, and this is best done by withholding control from others, or by being careful and abstemious in how that control is parceled out. In my experience with similar tools, and due to my idiosyncratic personal learning and presentation style, I do not take as great pleasure in participating in discussions where participants are not free to interject as in those where they have this right. Here preference of style would be a matter of personality, but with Elluminate one has the choice of adopting the approach one prefers. With WiZiQ that choice is made of necessity.

I think that what teachers need is option to use full or half duplex (as is possible with Elluminate), and option to grant audio and video for participants without handing over the whole gamut of privileges to change between slides and whiteboard, or to upload materials, or otherwise interfere with the instructional materials currently on display (or presentation materials, if we change teacher to a speaker at an online conference, or businessman making a sales pitch for that matter). These people all want to converse with their audience but not hand over control of what's on the whiteboard by virtue of granting them the power to speak or show a webcam. If there is a way to fine tune these permissions in WiZiQ none of the people who've been helping me test WiZiQ have found it yet.

As to the next question, how best to run a brainstorming session with more relaxed participants, WiZiQ would be a good choice for this because it is free, and would likely be adopted by members of a community, who might also wish to take advantage of its social networking aspects. In such a community, where members would interact over time, they would likely get to know one another and would educate each other in proper use of the tools (how to mute mics and wear headsets for example). WiZiQ appears to me to have its strengths in situations which would benefit from access to social networking tools, and connectivist philosophy.

So if one were to make the choice right now which client one were to choose, it would depend perhaps on how much money one had (WiZiQ is free), how high the stakes were within one's community (Elluminate is more stable and robust, and more flexible with regard to role of moderator), and whether or not the social networking possibilities with WiZiQ were worth exploring. WiZiQ is developing an enthusiastic following, and as part of a community of users that includes its developers, the possibility at this juncture of influencing the course of development is additionally encouraging.

Perhaps this article can contribute to the development effort. In order to encourage feedback I have blogged it at <http://advancededucation.blogspot.com/2007/11/whos-in-charge-here-wiziq-and.html>. If you feel you have anything to contribute to this discussion, please visit the blog and add your two cents, and/or leave comments at the 'official' WiZiQ blog at <http://wiziq.typepad.com>. You can also contribute comments on Elluminate blog reviews at <http://www.elluminate.com/rss/blogs.xml>.

Note: How do you spell webcam? Web cam (one word or two)? Do you have to capitalize Web as in Webcam? I decided to let the aggregate power of Wikipedia guide me: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webcam/>

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