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Web 2.0 Toolkit for Teaching and Learning EFL Presentation Skill

***** On the Internet *****

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Vance Stevens

UAE Naval College, HCT, CERT, Abu Dhabi
vancestev@gmail.com

Abstract

At the college where the author recently taught, each student has a laptop computer, which creates learning opportunities for the students but presents challenges in keeping them on task. The author designed a task-based course introducing a series of Web 2.0 tools that the students used to develop the speaking communications skills they were learning. The tools, including Google Docs, Prezi, SurveyMonkey, Jing, Blogger, and Slideshare.net, underpinned a course incorporating mind-mapping, creating viable surveys, harvesting and analyzing results, capturing screen shots, making effective presentations both in Prezi and PowerPoint, keeping a reflective blog, and documenting the students' accomplishments in simple ePortfolios. Action research showed positive student attitudes to the course, using data from a survey intended as a model for students and from their reflective blog posts.

Introduction

I was recently tasked with designing an academic presentations course for teenaged EFL students at a military college in the UAE. While at the college, the students' lives are highly regimented. Their day often begins before dawn with discipline or exercise. Their classes begin at 7:00 a.m. and go straight until 1:00. They continue after lunch with sports and other structured activities that leave little time for study. Though each cadet is issued a laptop computer, they have no Internet in their barracks and they are not allowed to bring their mobile phones onto the base. Their only Internet access is during class time, where vocational courses are taught by officers who are able to keep order through military discipline. Announcements posted in the classrooms warn the cadets to comply with instructors' orders to close their laptops when asked.

When I arrived at the college, teachers in many courses had complained about the distractions caused by Internet access, but the problem was especially acute for the civilian English teachers. When the cadets had English classes, they saw it as a chance to relax, watch videos on YouTube, play online games, or contact their

families through the Internet, and their friends through Facebook. English teachers had to be especially resourceful to be able to engage the students and keep them on task.

Although the highly experienced teachers at the college had many strategies for engaging students, many relied on strategies that kept the students off the computers. Due to my background in CALL (computer-assisted language learning) I was expected to address the problem by designing learning activities that would utilize the computers and hopefully engage the cadets through matching the curriculum with uses of their computers that would leverage their learning.

There were two courses for which syllabuses had been proposed but that were not actually being taught at the college, and I was put in charge of both of them. One was an academic writing course that I conducted almost entirely on computer, using course materials already on the Internet but mainly getting the students writing in Google Docs. The second course was an academic presentation course, which again had an existing syllabus that I was free to adapt. For example, where the original designer had envisaged PowerPoint, I decided that the presentation skills could be equally developed in Prezi, and so I adapted the syllabus to preserve the learning outcomes while bringing a number of online tools to bear on those outcomes.

I was free to choose a textbook for the course, and I selected *Viewpoints* by Steven Gershon, which was designed and illustrated so as to appeal to teenagers. Each copy had a CD-ROM that modeled language used in academic presentations and modules included topics which the book made relevant to teens, such as 'mottos' and another on 'surveys'. Again I adapted. For example, I morphed the topic of mottos to slogans for the environment that grafted nicely over the materials already in the book, and I connected what the students were doing to a global annual online event, Earth Day, and used the book mainly as a model for academic presentation style and language. In order to engage students and ensure their interest, various software tools were introduced that were new to the students. For example, apart from Prezi, we used Google extensively (especially Google Docs and Blogger), and I introduced the students to SurveyMonkey, and to Jing for capturing charts generated by SurveyMonkey.

Prezi

Prezi was introduced from the very first module. The students' initial reaction was, why not just use PowerPoint? They were not initially amenable to registering accounts with yet another Web 2.0 service and they regarded having to learn something new as a stumbling block, but I wanted to grab their attention from the outset and establish that this course would be different from any other in their experience. As we will see, this approach worked beyond expectations.

The Prezi website has a few tutorials explaining its concepts and how to best apply them to effective presentations while avoiding the nauseous downsides of zooming in and out of mind-maps. One significant match of Prezi to *Viewpoints* was that mind-mapping was an approach students were encouraged to use in their textbook and this happens to be the default template for organization in Prezi. But mainly it

served as a way to get students engaged hands-on in learning a new tool, coping with the media-assisted language learning inherent in the Prezi tutorials <<http://prezi.com/learn/>>, and then getting them to apply their new knowledge in a way that created artifacts on the Web and empowered the students to communicate through these artifacts in the target language.

I made worksheets for the students to help ensure they would work through the tutorials and then had them make simple Prezis introducing one another (the topic of the first lesson in *Viewpoints*). As they are used to helping one another, they became functional in Prezi fairly easily, and found they liked it. We then moved on to the next unit in *Viewpoints*, on mottos for life. As I have noted, I had them research and choose slogans for the environment and create presentations incorporating both images and video. The multimedia component gave them an excuse to go on to YouTube as a valid classroom exercise. I put the links to the Prezis they produced up on our class wiki and introduced a social network component to expand the audience beyond our class by arranging for us to be a part of an annual Earth Day event, so the students were aware through this device that their Prezis, available online, were connecting them to other students worldwide (Adams, Montagne, Rodriguez, and Stevens, 2012).

SurveyMonkey

The next unit in *Viewpoints* was on surveys, so I decided to model what I wanted the students to do for that unit by creating a simple survey on their attitudes towards Prezi and presenting it in the manner that I would expect them to emulate for their own projects. Here I introduced another tool, SurveyMonkey. One feature of SurveyMonkey is that it creates visualizations of the results. Paid versions of SurveyMonkey allow users to download their charts, whereas the free version prints SAMPLE on the download. However, it displays clearly readable charts on the computer screen, where screen captures can be made. The tool I used for this was Jing, available from <http://jingproject.com>. This free online tool is made by the same company TechSmith that produces the rather expensive but highly regarded Camtasia screencast software. At this stage in the course I wanted to teach the students some of the finer features of PowerPoint, so I used screen captures from my SurveyMonkey results as objects I uploaded to my model PowerPoint presentation about their opinion of Prezi. These results are discussed later in this article.

One reason I surveyed their opinions was that I wanted them to experience participating as respondents in a survey. Creating questionnaires is tricky for students who have little prior experience with surveys. For their own projects, students drafted their questionnaires in Google Docs to get teacher feedback on them. This was necessary because many students needed help in visualizing how their questionnaires would appear to respondents. Some students polled themselves in writing their questions, asking for example, what country would I like to visit and why (the answer choices being countries the student wanted to visit and reasons he wanted to visit those countries). Other students asked questions such as, how many players on a football team (10, 11, 12), or which team won the world cup

in 2008, and Google docs served as a means of guiding them to direct their questionnaires at opinions, not known facts.

When it came time to create the actual questionnaires, all but one of the 85 students chose to do it in SurveyMonkey. They were given the option to use the more familiar Word and Excel, which the one student did, but the fact that the remaining students all managed without significant difficulties to open SurveyMonkey accounts, add questions and choose appropriate answer formats, go back and edit their questions when necessary, “send” their surveys for data collection, and notify the teacher of the URL, speaks volumes to the ease of use of the program.

Jing

In order to place objects in PowerPoint the object must be uploaded from a file on your computer. I taught the students to screen-capture the charts generated by SurveyMonkey in Jing and save them as files on their computers for incorporation into PowerPoint. The hardest part of the process was for students to download and install the Jing software. Once that was done, actually making the screen captures was trivial.

Alternatively Jing allows saving screen captures in the cloud in which case it returns the URL for where that screen shot resides. It is also possible to annotate the screen-capture, as illustrated below. Happily, the Posterous blog platform, which I use for many of my online tutorials, accepts these URLs to images stored online and displays the images themselves in the post, as shown in this tutorial explaining how students can create accounts in SurveyMonkey and harvest data their surveys there. <<http://vancestevens.posterous.com/creating-and-publishing-surveys-in-survey-mon>>. This and other screen shots are displayed from the URL of the image saved by Jing to screencast.com (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. SurveyMonkey

This feature, where you don't have to actually save your captures to computer and then upload them to a blog post, greatly simplifies the process of illustrating tutorials with images cropped from your screen, simply by pasting the image URL into the post. Handily, that URL is in the paste buffer ready to be pasted right after your image is saved to the cloud.

Model report on the study

The model survey was conducted to see how students responded to working with Prezi, an Internet presentation site that was completely unknown to them when they were first asked to create accounts and make presentations there. The survey was offered to approximately 85 second-year male UAE-national college students taking the Academic Communication course via its URL linked from the class wiki portal <<http://acomunications.pbworks.com>>. Approximately a third of the students, 34 in all, responded to the survey. All 34 answered all of the questions.

Responses were highly favorable toward working with Prezi. 85.3% of the students said they liked working with it and over a third said it was easy (not difficult) to learn, as shown in Figures 2 and 3 below.

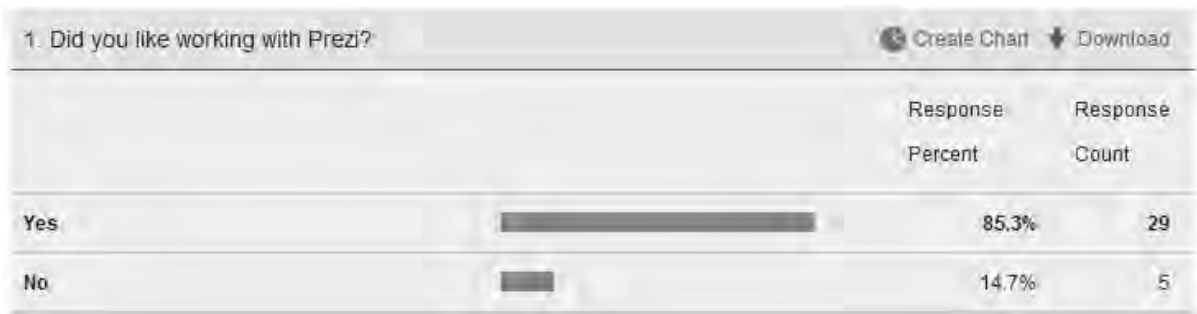


Figure 2. Survey question 1



Figure 3. Survey question 2

I asked if there was any preference for Prezi or PowerPoint. As noted previously, when told they would be using Prezi, many students complained that they wanted to use PowerPoint because they were already familiar with it. They didn't see why they

needed to learn a new presentation tool. Perhaps those who didn't want to change were in the two-thirds who didn't respond to the survey, but of those who responded, three quarters said they now preferred Prezi to PowerPoint (see Figure 4).

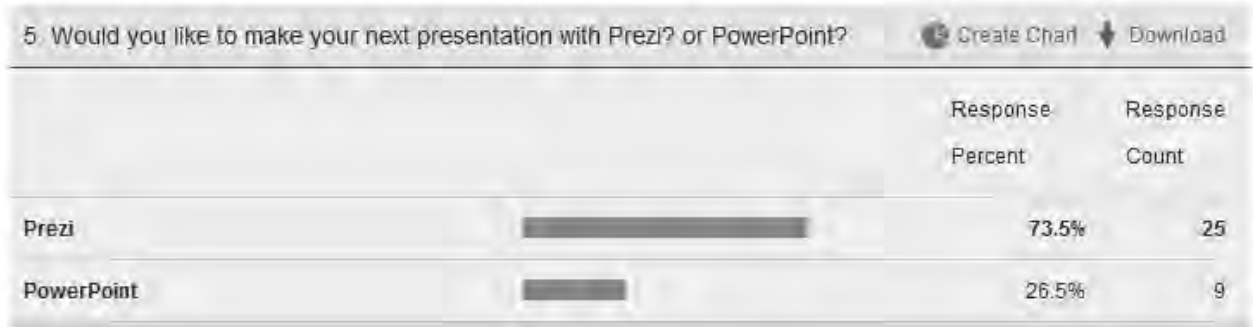


Figure 4. Survey question 5

I was curious how the students accepted the mind-mapping approach to presentation as opposed to the linear approach inherent in PowerPoint. As can be seen in Figure 5, over three quarters of the respondents said they preferred the mind-map approach.

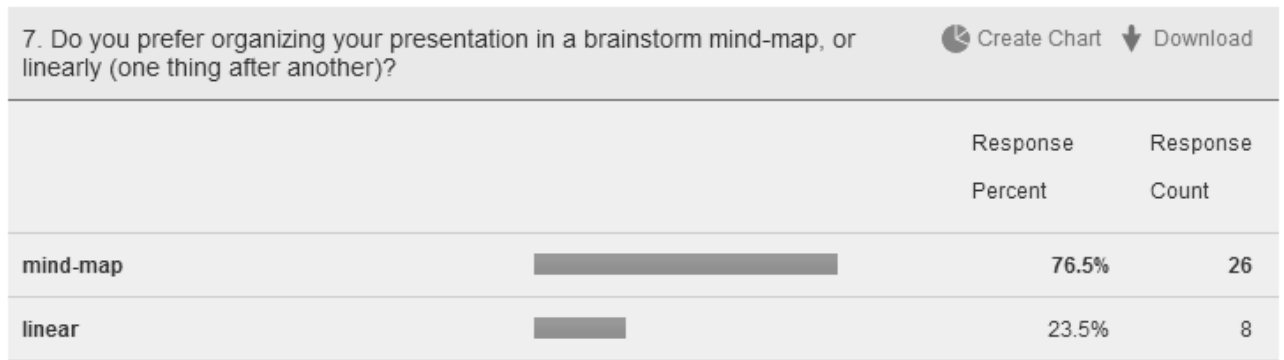


Figure 5. Survey question 7

I asked if the mind-mapping approach used in both the students' textbooks and echoed in Prezi helped them with organization of their presentation. As Figure 6 shows, 88% of the respondents thought it did.

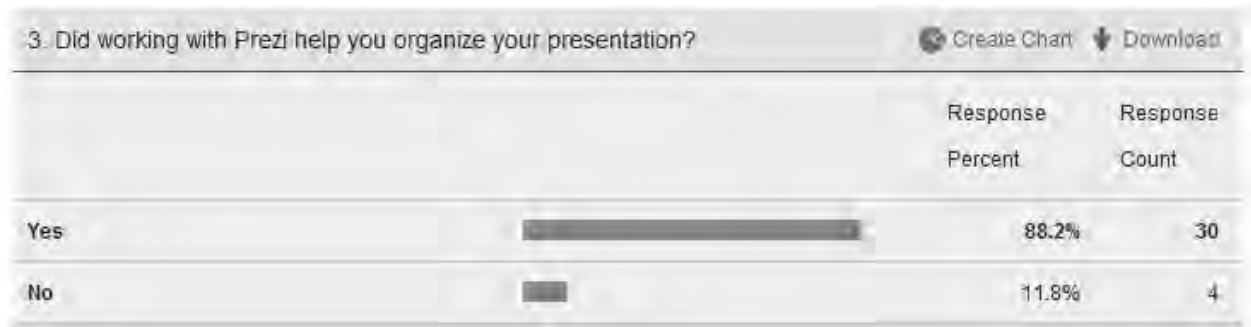


Figure 6. Survey question 3

Finally I asked if they thought we should teach Prezi to future students at the college, and again three quarters of those who responded thought we should. Thus, survey results were preponderantly positive in favor of Prezi and its approach to organization of presentations.

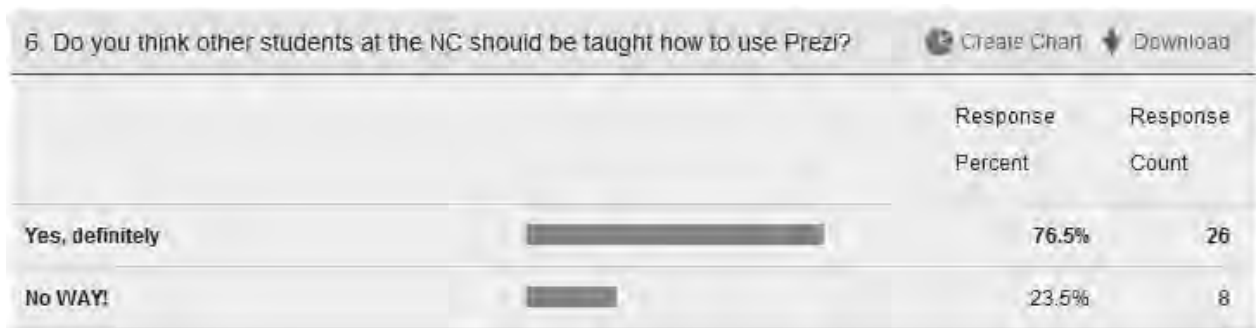


Figure 7. Survey question 6

Qualitative data from Blogger

Another part of the syllabus for this particular course specifies that students should keep a journal to reflect on their learning. As the students already had Google accounts and used Google Docs, I had them all start blogs in Blogger. For the great majority of the students, perhaps all of them, this was their first experience with either consuming or creating blogs.

The posts made shortly after the Prezi module tended to express appreciation for having learned a new tool, especially as this tool appears to have been viewed as an easier and more versatile option to PowerPoint. Many students said in those posts that they found it enjoyable (especially in that they were encouraged to embed multimedia) and felt it helped them improve their language skills. One student noted that because all the students' Prezis were online and easily linked from the

class portal, they served as useful models, and as indicators of the standard expected for other students. Here are some of the comments:

- I have learned many things in the Prezi website. This website has helped me to improve my English language so much and it lets me arrange my ideas in order. It helps me make my subject and reports with pictures and videos consistent and clear. This will help in the future, when I will have to make more presentations soon <<http://nc13mytown.blogspot.com/2012/05/i-have-learned-many-things-in-prezi.html>>
- During my school time I did many presentations on PowerPoint but it was a bit boring because of the sloppy mechanics of PPT. During that time I found out about Prezi but I never thought I would ever use it in my life. But fortunately here in college I got the chance to learn how to use it. It's actually much easier and more fun than PPT and I enjoy presenting using it. I have already made some pretty good Prezis. <<http://nc13striver.blogspot.com/2012/05/during-my-school-time-i-did-many.html>>
- In my opinion I think that Prezi is the best way to learn, even better than PowerPoint. Using Prezi. I learned how to share video and how to show it in the class. Also, the most important thing is that I learned how to make a presentation in the class. It's much faster than with PowerPoint. In addition it's a more convenient and very good way to connect with the teacher. And it works with the network. <<http://waleidnc13.blogspot.com/2012/05/name-blog-how-to-swim-in-right-way-url.html>>
- At first we thought it was a very hard site but now it seems so simple and we like this site if we want to present anything because it has nice animations and effects. <<http://royalalneaimi.blogspot.com/2012/07/i-learned-many-things-about-prezi-and-i.html>>
- Also we can see what our friends have done and learn from their mistakes. It's really a good way to communicate and learn. <<http://whatweunderstandfromclass.blogspot.com/2012/07/what-we-learn-your-class.html>>

Later students were prompted to comment on their learning in the course in general. I was particularly interested in how they thought the battery of Web 2.0 tools as a whole affected their learning. Here are some sample posts:

- I have learned many things different than in other subjects. ... We have used new ways of learning like presenting, posting, and making surveys. We have used whatever we learned in our assignments and work in class. We find new things that make our work easier and helpful. We found that presenting in Prezi is better than PowerPoint. We try also to share our work with friends. This subject made a lot of changes in me. What I like most about this subject is most of the work was in laptop. I really enjoyed doing Prezi and blogger. It was very interesting and useful for me. <<http://altenaiji1.blogspot.com/2012/07/what-i-have-learned-from-academic.html>>

- So far I learned some awesome stuff in academic communication. Recently we did some work on how to make a survey. Our instructor has taught why someone would make a survey and how we can make it. We used a website called www.surveymonkey.com to make our surveys. Then we published them online and gathered the answers from some people (classmates mostly). After that the instructor asked us to make charts from the answers we gathered and send them to him. When we reached the charts step we got to learn how to use a cool program known as Jing, its a program that can cut and crop pictures anytime you want and makes an online link for it if you want and you record videos also. <<http://nc13striver.blogspot.com/2012/07/so-far.html>>
- There are many ways to communicate with others and share information in the internet with friends and others such as blogger and prezi so when I was out of college I didn't understand this way of communication but when I joined the college I learned and mastered this way. <<http://learningacademic.blogspot.com/2012/07/1-first-of-all-i-learned-how-to-deal.html>>
- Ever since I joined the college, I was poor in academic work but now I have learned many things about English language like I have learned how to communicate with the teacher via e-mail and I have learned how to create a blog. Also I have learned how to do prezi, learned how to do google docs and not only this, I have learned how to post in blogger too and I have learned how to capture web pages and edit them with Jing. I learned how to report. Really I have improved my English language. I have learned to do surveymonkey. Now you can see how I learned to present the presentation. Thank you Mr.Vance. Really you have improved my English and we understand your message. <<http://nc13town.blogspot.com/2012/07/what-i-learn-form-academic-composition.html>>

The original raw data is online (see end notes).

Consolidating Accomplishments in ePortfolios

The final syllabus requirement for the course was for students to make ePortfolios pointing to what they had accomplished in the course. As time was running out in the semester, and the concept of ePortfolios was new to the students, I chose to let the students fulfill this requirement in a simple blog post with links to all their Prezis, blog posts, and surveys they had created for their final project. I had intended to have them upload the PowerPoints they made for their final projects to <http://slideshare.net> and add their Slideshare links to their burgeoning ePortfolios. However there was a problem with students reaching the Slideshare site from the college during their window for creating their ePortfolios, so I cancelled that requirement, but this would have put all of their work, even their PowerPoint slide shows, online for presentation to a wider audience.

Alan November recorded a conversation with the EdTech Crew (November, 2012) in which he spoke about how inspiring it was to let students see each other's work, even from one year to the next. He also pointed out that it is not enough to change

only the tool sets in each student's personal learning environment to fully optimize the potential inherent in those environments. In order for learning to be what is often called transformational, it is necessary to change the audience as well. In other words, work produced intramurally for a teacher, classmates, and administrators within the walls of an institution has limited impact on the learning that takes place within that institution. However, once students have the impression that their work is visible to other students, and especially those outside the institution, then the quality of their work starts reflecting that awareness.

In the military college where this work was undertaken, and in all settings involving children and minors for that matter, there are issues whereby we proceed cautiously in engaging that wider audience. My students however mentioned to me that they proudly shared their work with their families. The ePortfolio was a final consolidation of this work, and as it's on the Internet, a matter of public record. <<http://acomunication.pbworks.com/w/page/53399451/week8#Seewhatblogsyourfellowstudentshavecreated>>.

Discussion

It appears from the quantitative survey that Prezi was well received by the third of the students who chose to respond to the survey. Qualitative data from their blog posts, which most of the 85 students completed, tend to corroborate that. The students largely appeared satisfied with their experience with all the Web 2.0 tools they learned. They found them easy and enjoyable to use, and expressed their view that these tools helped them in their learning, and were valuable to know for their future careers and studies.

These findings have implications for prospects for course design along similar lines. Those favoring use of Web 2.0 in language learning often present compelling but sometimes intuitive cases for student use of online creativity tools. This report presents some evidence supporting this intuition, in the context of the particular learning environment under study, where the students in general had little prior experience with using computers in their learning.

Notes

- The samples presented here are from a compilation of what students said about the course in their blog posts, available online here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pQxTmDCArZjG84lzY4C9UZA0JMt6N5S5PJsgLGPnvPg/edit>.
- All the students' blogs can be browsed as the students posted them here: <http://acomunication.pbworks.com/w/page/53399451/week8#Seewhatblogsyourfellowstudentshavecreated>

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