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Summer 2013 Innovative Course Development Grant Report

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DATE SUBMITTED: September 23, 2014

Title of Grant Award: Summer 2013 Innovative Course Development Grant

Project Goal: Using VoiceThread for cross-cultural collaborative analysis of French cinema

When Implemented: Fall 2013

Brief Description of the Project (as described in the proposal)

VoiceThread is a Web-based tool that promotes meaningful conversation through the use of visual prompts such as video clips, images and graphs. The motivation behind this project was primarily an interest in engaging students in critical thinking about cultural topics and themes encountered in French cinema. By redesigning our course in Francophone Film and Culture (FREN 370) using VoiceThread, I was able to create a collaborative online space for students to exchange insights and opinions in French regarding sociocultural aspects of the films discussed in class, guiding them through carefully scaffolded activities involving different media. Media used for this project included movie trailers and clips, photographs (e.g., movie scenes, actors, architecture), maps, statistical tables and graphs. A teacher's PowerPoint presentation for each of the films introduced was also created to build and activate students' background knowledge and identify key cultural concepts in each film.

How the Project was Implemented (including how it differed from original plan):

The various course components outlined in the original proposal were successfully developed according to the proposed timetable. Following a short icebreaker activity to allow them to experiment with the technology, students completed VoiceThread assignments relating to the five films discussed in the course: *The Class*, *L'Auberge espagnole*, *Human Resources*, *The Grocer's Son* and *Intouchables*. Discovered shortly before the course was taught, the last two films were substituted for *The Girl from Paris* and *The Taste of Others* (listed in the proposal as Films no. 4 and 5) in order to better acquaint students with French food culture and village life (*The Grocer's Son*) and the modern social structure in France (*Intouchables*). PowerPoint presentations created for each film were designed to develop students' sociocultural competence, equipping students with a basic understanding of French society, while helping them better appreciate ideas and perspectives that resonate across historical and cultural boundaries.

Results of the Project:

PowerPoints and VoiceThread activities designed for the course were precisely tailored to aspects of French culture featured in each film and posted in Moodle for easy access. The first film, *The Class*, introduced students to the French educational system, challenges immigrants face in Europe, issues relating to cultural identity and language attitudes, and slang expressions used by French youth. With *L'Auberge espagnole*, students explored the European Union, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Erasmus exchange program, while learning about study abroad opportunities available to CSUSB students (e.g., CSU international programs, the Fulbright U.S. Student Program, the Teaching Assistant Program in France). *Human Resources* provided an opportunity to examine in closer detail the “Grandes Ecoles” system in France and French trade unions. Viewing *The Grocer’s Son*, students were able to experience French country life, discussing urban to rural migration in France and related topics (e.g., eco-tourism). Through *Intouchables* (a hugely successful ‘dramedy’ inspired by real-life events), students engaged in a comparative analysis of social patterns and practices across cultures and delved into the cultural meaning of French patrimoine.

Additional Comments (Lessons Learned, Insights, Future Plans, etc.):

Using VoiceThread boosted the motivation and language skills of students enrolled in FREN 370, improving most notably their oral proficiency in French. Students found the VoiceThread conversations stimulating and enjoyable. Those who were apprehensive about expressing their opinions in French could gather their thoughts ahead of time and record their voices as many times as they wanted before posting their comments. Uploading materials into the Web-based interface was very straightforward and VoiceThreads were easy to edit. As such, VoiceThread provided a visually interesting, non-threatening collaborative environment for critical analysis of social and cultural issues that was both user-friendly and effective. Integrating VoiceThread into FREN 370 for digital conversational interaction also increases our chances of making the course available to other campuses in the CSU-wide French Consortium while providing a platform for connecting our classes with students and professionals across the US and abroad.

As regards pricing, I decided to sign up for a free VoiceThread account instead of purchasing a subscription. The free account allowed me to create the activities I needed (VoiceThreads for five films plus a icebreaker activity), allowing students 3 minutes of phone commenting plus unlimited voice and text comments. One of the drawbacks of using a free account, however, is that you are limited to a 5 VoiceThreads and you are not be able to delete old VoiceThreads to make room for new ones. Although I was able to increase this limit by opening a second free account using my personal email address, I will likely opt for a paid subscription for greater flexibility (single instructor or department account) in the future.