



Inspiring Writing With VoiceThread

by Amanda Hankel, editor

When Joan Biese, a first grade teacher at Rock Ledge School in Seymour, WI, started looking for something to share her student's writing, she knew there had to be something on the web.

Biese, who calls herself a "perpetual learner" always looking to try new technological tools in her classroom, had been using a program called Artsonia to showcase her students' artwork for years. The program is a web-based, password-protected site that allows Biese to take photos of artwork and upload them to the site. Using individual student passwords, parents and family members then can access the work via the site.

"Students' grandparents in Arizona who could see and comment on students' artwork, and then the students could see the comments," Biese said of Artsonia. "I knew there had to be something like that as a vehicle to share their other curriculum areas."

After much research, Biese said she finally discovered a program called [VoiceThread \(VT\)](#).

"I was searching for a web-based approach to sharing my students' writing projects, that could also incorporate audio and visual enhancement opportunities, as well as give my students the opportunity to give and receive feedback from others on their writing pieces," Biese said. "Upon visiting the website for the first time, I was impressed with the sample projects I viewed, as well as the ease of classroom implementation the site offered to educators."

VT is a web-based, media-sharing tool. Video, audio and PDF files can be uploaded to VT, and uploaders can choose who they want to share the files with and allow access for others to comment on and edit the submitted pieces. The educational sector of VT allows teachers to set limits on who can view, comment on and edit the pieces that are shared.



After exploring the VT site and going through the free tutorials, Biese decided to purchase an individual subscription and try it in her classroom in January.

“It was quite simple to set up my classroom account,” Biese said. “Every student had his or her own unique username and password, and only those in our classroom group could view and comment on the projects we created. As the account administrator, I could invite others—parents, grandparents, teachers in other school districts and our school principal—and give them permission to either view-only or view and leave comments.”

From that point on, VT evolved in Biese’s classroom—for the better.

At first, Biese used the tool solely for her students to share their writing workshop pieces with others. The students’ writing pieces, composed of writing and illustration, were scanned and uploaded to the VT site by parent volunteers under each student’s own account. Once the writing pieces were on their VT account, students added the first comment by reading their piece and recording their voice as an audio clip on their VT project.

They also had the opportunity to use a “disappearing-ink” pen to highlight and draw on their scanned piece and make notations as they spoke about their writing. Others with permission to view and comment on the student’s work also used the special pen to circle parts they liked, or to draw happy faces on the piece, for example. A student’s piece was officially considered “published” if it became a VT project, and those finished projects were shared with classmates and a selected community of family and friends.

For the rest of the school year, the idea of VT took off in Biese’s classroom.

“It made the kids go crazy with their writing,” Biese said.

By the end of the school year, the 20-student class had published more than 500 pieces of writing, and the program became an intrinsic motivator for students to push themselves to improve.



“It’s a great encouraging, motivating vehicle for the kids because they love to see their stuff up there and they love to be able to share it with their families,” Biese said. “It’s just such a wonderful way to keep track of their progress. And they were seeing the progression of their writing abilities as we went from January to May. Students would look up some of their old published pieces and they’d say, ‘Can we delete this one? I want to revise that piece.’”

“After they had a little bit more information under their belt, they’d say, ‘I should put more space between my words,’ or, ‘I should write neater.’ They had that intrinsic motivation to want to make their published pieces look better because they knew they had a large audience. It really gave them purpose and determination. Where if I had just handed their paper back to them and said, ‘This is a paper you did back in January. I’d like to see how you can make it better,’ they wouldn’t get it. But in this case, it was coming from them. They were telling me they wanted to make things better, and that’s what authors do. They really felt like authors and they took an ownership in this.”

Biese said the use of VT didn’t mean the class devoted more time to writing, it’s just that the students were more motivated to produce. Sharing the four classroom computers, Biese’s own classroom computer and the school computer lab, students would use their free time during recesses, for example, to write or record a piece on VT.

“It’s a cycle of motivation,” Biese said. “They’re motivated to do it, and then when it’s on [VT], they get more outside motivation—comments from their friends saying, ‘I really liked this part of your piece,’ or, ‘I thought this part was really funny.’ So they’re motivated to do more again. It’s this awesome cycle of encouragement. It’s what you want the kids to be using for motivation—encouraging them to encourage each other.”

After seeing such success with her students’ writing, Biese decided to try VT with other curriculum areas as well. In particular, she wanted to find a way to use VT as a tool to check for and assess student understanding for math.

This time, instead of uploading student work, she uploaded a math story problem as a VT project, providing an audio recording of what the math problem said, as well as dictating the



audio and visual tasks she wanted the students to perform on that project's page. Students were to read or listen to the story problem presented and record their explanation of how they'd go about solving the story problem, using the special pen to illustrate their thinking.

Students had many opportunities to complete this task—in the computer lab, at one of the four classroom computers, or even at home if they had internet access. Because she was asking for a voice recording, Biese knew the students were doing their own work.

“The students loved recording their own methods for problem solving in two ways (with their voice and the pen), and I could review their work to get a better idea for who understood the math concepts and who was still struggling with explanations or processes,” Biese said.

And, Biese has found VT useful for sharing individual student projects with other teachers—such as speech instructors or English Language Learning teachers.

“VT was provided me with a means of not only assessing my students' learning, but also communicating my students' progress with others—parents, colleagues and the students themselves.”

For now, Biese is the only teacher in her district with a VT subscription. Aside from her individual class subscription, the only other investment made to use VT has been a set of microphone headsets purchased by the school. Biese has five in her classroom. She shared her success with the school's library media specialist, and they looked into purchasing a subscription for the K-2 building, but decided against it for now due to lack of professional development.

But Biese thinks with a full year of experience with the program after this coming school year, she can definitely get enough supporters on board to broaden its use. She's already presented her use of VT to assess student math understanding to the school board.

“It's one of my personal challenges for myself this year is to really see how I can implement this VT program into every corner of the curriculum and document student progress,” Biese said.



Biese also said she believes the use of VT will have an effect on student performance in the common core standards.

“Looking at the standards—most of it is focused on teacher supported skills,” Biese said. “I think it’s incredible that these students were able to do so much of this independently. I think that’s going to have an impact when I’m able to use this for the full year to move students from teacher-assisted to assisting each other and a cross collaborative environment. Peer collaboration is an important element in a lot of curriculum areas.”

Aside from VT, Biese said she uses technology in other ways in her classroom. In April, the district’s parent teacher organization purchased a classroom set of iPod touches. The gadgets have spent most of their time in Biese’s classroom.

“It was the closest I figured I could get to a one-to-one learning experience with those little kids,” Biese said. “By March and April, my kids were pretty tech savvy.”

Biese is also a SMART Exemplary Educator and a certified trainer on the [SMART Notebook software](#). She has had a SMART Board, interactive whiteboard, in her classroom for the last 13 years. Soon, she’ll be receiving an iPad, and has already been collecting sites and information on how to use it in the classroom.

“I’m big into seeing how others are finding success and then trying it out in my own classroom,” Biese said.

Biese recommends other educators interested in trying new technology in their classrooms start by searching online and reading other educator’s blogs. She said [LiveBinders](#) is one site where teachers can share websites and other resources. She has already created several binders, one called “iThings in Education,” for example, that lists iPod and iPad apps she’s found useful. Her binders are open to view, and her LiveBinders name is Gr1teacher.

Regardless of the gadget or technology, Biese said she sees the benefits of using technology in her classroom, and that keeps her exploring new tools and techniques.



Technology, she said, has been a vehicle to individual student learning based on their interests and abilities. It's adaptable to every child regardless of ability level or gender.

"It's been a thrill for me to see the kids' reaction to these different things," Biese said. "I'm not expecting it to be 100% positive all the time. With each school year, you get a different class demographic. But I'm always going to be looking into ways to encourage students to grow with their own learning. It helps me become a more effective teacher, as well. I'm never going to stop."