Using Web Video to Fine-Tune Student Performance

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by Travis Kaya

For three years, faculty and students at Baruch College of the City University of New York have been honing their public-speaking and presentation skills online with the college's Video Oral Communication Assessment Tool, or VOCAT, which allows instructors to view and give feedback on uploaded student videos.

After finding success with the tool on campus, developers are now actively searching for ways to take VOCAT to the next level, both beyond Baruch and across academic disciplines. They believe video-sharing on VOCAT has potential application in everything from distance learning and foreign-language instruction to performance arts and industrial trades.

"We're looking ahead to where it might go," said Mikhail Gershovich, platform designer and director of the Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute at Baruch. "I don't want this to be just an assessment tool."

VOCAT allows students to view videos of themselves giving presentations or performances online—all video is taped and uploaded by a college technician—and lets them read and respond to feedback from faculty members. The software also keeps a log of student videos, allowing them to track their progress over the course of a semester.

Patricia Juza, director of language and test preparation programs in the Division of Continuing and Professional Studies, uses VOCAT in her introductory business classes. Allowing students to see themselves—and their instructor's feedback—onscreen, she said, has helped give them new perspective on their oral-communication skills. For overly confident students who think they don't need any help with public speaking, Ms. Juza said, "it's eye-opening to see themselves on tape."

Before VOCAT became available, Ms. Juza required students to post videos on YouTube, but having them set up their own accounts was too complicated and led to privacy concerns. "We want them to spend more time viewing the video … and less time dealing with the actual logistics," she said.

VOCAT was developed in 2007 by a team of Web developers at Baruch, with assistance from Oregon-based Web contractor Cast Iron Coding to help faculty deal with those logistics. Although VOCAT has been successful as an assessment tool, Mr. Gershovich believes the video-sharing platform—built "before Web 2.0″—has great potential to further enhance student learning. He is now looking for input and funding from faculty, Web developers, and the private sector to decide what VOCAT's next step will be. "Everyone seems to love it," he said. "There's an opportunity to build a community of developers to let the thing have a life of its own."

Mr. Gershovich said the platform may be particularly useful in distance-learning courses to virtually bring students face-to-face with their instructors. He thinks Web video might also be useful in fields—like machine repair or even certain surgical training—where it is important for instructors and students to visually review their performance on a given physical task.

The developers are also looking for ways to finance the platform to keep it growing. "If this project could be self-sustaining, then it would be perfect," Mr. Gershovich said.

VOCAT has piqued the interest of a few private firms wanting to adapt the technology to corporate customer service and foreign-language training. And while the developers are not opposed to selling their product to industry, they would like to see at least some component of the platform remain open source and available to educators.

"We want to move it in a direction where it's not just a tool for Baruch but for other schools as well," said Zach Davis, majority partner at Cast Iron Coding who led VOCAT's development with Mr. Gershovich. "Mikhail and I are very committed to making this something as open as possible."