Cloud Computing Presents New Opportunities for Students

Technological advancement and its impact on education has been a common topic among educators for some years. However, owing to its constant and rapid development, it is important to reconsider continually the implication new technologies have on schools, teachers and students. Two major advances in technology which have occurred in the last few years are Web 2.0 and cloud computing. Web 2.0 is a term used to describe the second generation of the web, whereby websites operate similarly to desktop programs. Instead of having to buy software and install it on a computer, people are now able to access many excellent programs online. These programs often allow users to store their creations in an online space, which is referred to as ‘the cloud’. The website Prezi is an example of a Web 2.0 website that has many applications for the classroom – it even targets educators by offering student and teacher licences. In order to illuminate the advantages of this software as a tool for the classroom, a trial of the software was conducted in one Year 8 English and SOSE class at Somerville House. An overview of the benefits of Prezi, as well as the response students had to its implementation, will be outlined in this article.

What is Prezi?
The easiest way to explain Prezi is that it is a presentation tool. Essentially, it allows users to present information to a group, similar to Microsoft PowerPoint. However, there are two features, in particular, which differentiate Prezi from PowerPoint. Firstly, the program needs the internet to work. Users create an online account with Prezi where they both make and store their Prezi presentations. If they want to deliver their presentations, the internet is required. Secondly, Prezi presentations do not follow a traditional slide format. Rather, a Prezi presentation is much more free-flowing. Users position their information, images and videos on a large, white background, called the ‘Prezi Canvas’, and develop a path for the presentation to follow.

Prezi also provides a range of different drawings which can be used to create diagrams (see Figure 4). Users simply select the diagram they wish to use and then fill in the content.

How does Prezi work?
While it may take some practice, Prezi is fairly simple to use. The background of a Prezi presentation, the ‘Prezi Canvas’, allows users to position content anywhere on the screen. To make the presentation more visually engaging, the program also allows users to zoom in and out of the canvas (see Figures 2 and 3). This function is useful because it enables the construction of a smooth presentation where the user can highlight clear connections between ideas. It is explained in Prezi: Trading Linear Presentations for Conceptual Learning Experiences that “instruction presented in a linear fashion does not align with how students think and may unconsciously discourage hierarchical thinking as it forces viewers to progress from one concept to another without relation or integration with the foundational concept” (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Knight & Tucker, 2011). With Prezi, users are able to create non-linear presentations which encourage students to “identify patterns, comparisons, relationships, and differences between information” (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Knight & Tucker, 2011). The program lends itself well to the presentation of diagrams, concept maps and the highlighting of links between ideas.
Prezi has its own range of diagrams which can be used. Simply choose a drawing and then insert your own content.

To learn how to use Prezi, the Prezi website, as well as YouTube, provides many clear instruction videos, where users can be taught basic and practice with, the program.

Additional Features

• Another useful feature of Prezi is that users can view the presentations of other Prezi users. These presentations can be useful sources for ideas on how to present a concept. However, this does not mean that all Prezis are made public for others to view. Users have the choice of making their presentations public or private.

• A recently added feature of Prezi is the ability to insert templates, rather than working purely on a blank white canvas (see Figure 5). Similar to the templates one would find on Microsoft PowerPoint, Prezi templates have pre-set images and designs that users can then modify with their own text and other files.

• Prezi also provides a range of fonts and colours to create unique and visually dynamic presentations.

Figure 5:

An additional feature of Prezi is that users can select a template to work with, rather than beginning with a blank white canvas.

Educational Uses

Prezi has a range of features which are particularly useful for the classroom. Firstly, Prezi enables teachers and students to present non-linear concepts in a visually engaging presentation.

Because Prezi allows users to move freely around the canvas, and to zoom in and out of the canvas, non-linear concepts can be presented more easily and the relationships between ideas can be made clearer.

An additional feature of Prezi is that users are able to invite up to ten others to edit their Prezi. Relating this feature to a classroom setting, up to ten students are able to access the same Prezi at the same time. This feature allows students to work on group presentations in class, or from their own homes. For example, if a group of students is creating a Prezi presentation for an assessment task, these students can ‘meet’ online to work on the presentation from their own homes, thus removing the need to save and resend files continually.

Research and results

Prezi was trialled with my Year 8 English and SOSE class in 2011, when the students were asked to create free accounts. Students were given time to self-teach and to use Prezi both in class and for homework assignments. They appeared to respond very positively to the new program. If students were taught content through a Prezi, they were noticeably more engaged and often commented enthusiastically on its use. Similarly, if students were given the choice of creating a presentation with PowerPoint or Prezi, most would opt for Prezi.

After students had obtained some experience in using Prezi, they were surveyed as to their initial reaction to the change to their learning environment. The results indicated that while the students found Prezi visually engaging and particularly appealing when watching a presentation, many were still apprehensive about its use. The survey revealed students need time to adjust to using Prezi. The majority of the class indicated that it disliked using Prezi; however, 58% then indicated that they believed they would come to like it better with more practice. Similarly, the majority of students nominated Microsoft PowerPoint as their first choice for creating presentations for assessment; however, 65% of the class selected Prezi over PowerPoint for watching a presentation, and 78% of students said that they would recommend it to others. These results highlight the likelihood of students opting for Prezi over PowerPoint once they have more exposure to, and practice with, the program.

Reflection

While PowerPoint is the ‘go-to’ option for the vast majority of users in present times, it is still important to consider alternative modes of presentation which are useful for the classroom. A need in many schools today is the creation of learning experiences which are authentic and meaningful for the Millenial Generation. Kleiman writes:

Unfortunately, over the past 20 years, there has been a significant decline in the percentage of high school students who find school to be meaningful and interesting... many find that schools do not provide the real-world connections and uses of technology to learn, communicate, and create what they have at home (2004, p.251).

Prezi encourages collaboration, non-linear thinking and allows for the presentation to authentic online audiences. As Groundwater-Smith, Ewing and Le Cornu state:

...classrooms of the future will need to explore strategies that emphasise lateral creative thinking, problem-solving and design... curricula will need to find ways that encourage students to develop their creative and problem-solving abilities so that they are sufficiently confident to take risks in exploring ideas, issues and concepts (2007, pp.145-146).

However, while Prezi is continuing to develop and improve, and certainly engages students, PowerPoint remains a leading choice for presenters and offers a feeling of familiarity and comfort which Prezi cannot. Teachers need to use a range of resources and tools in the classroom to suit the diverse needs of their students. Prezi will not work as a replacement for PowerPoint, but rather as an alternative - something which will help to complement teaching pedagogy and resources, and hopefully something which will increase student engagement and interest.

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Jessica has presented at the English Teachers Association of Queensland State Conference in August 2011 and this article was published in the Words’ Worth Journal - Vol. 44, No. 3, November 2011

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References:

