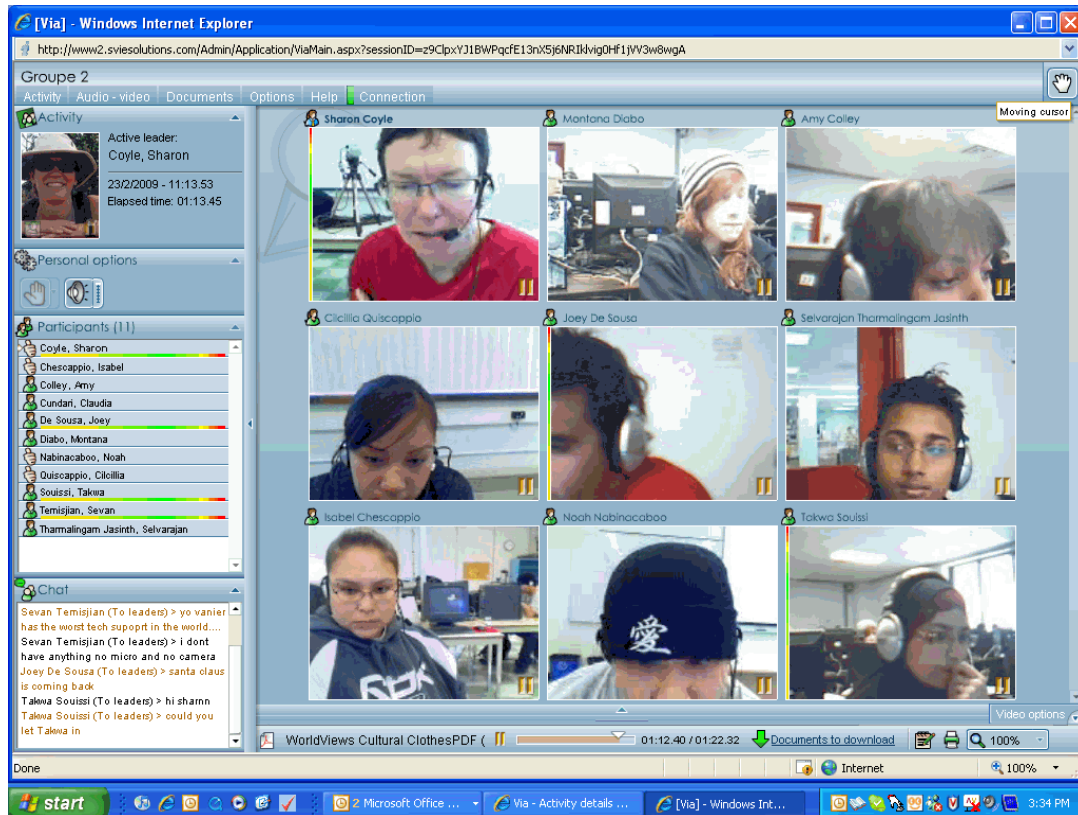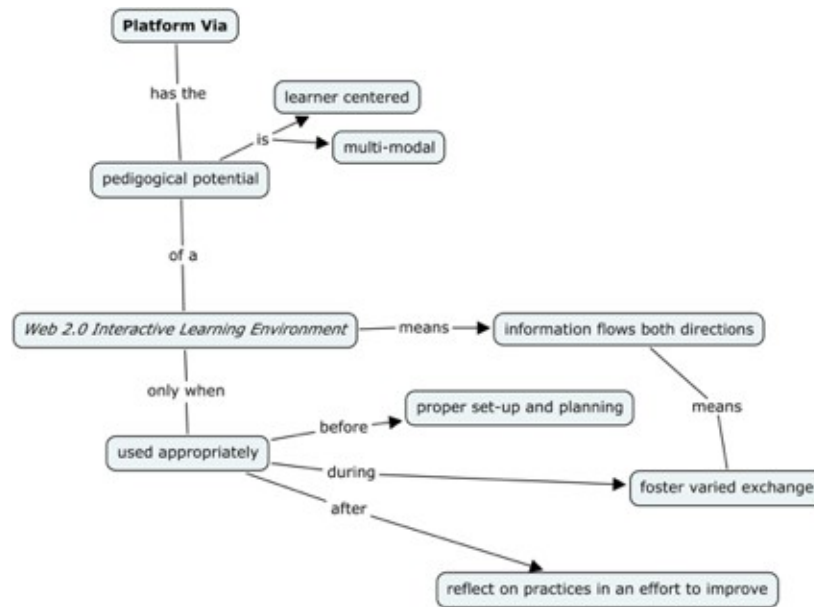Sharon Coyle

Realising the Pedagogical Potential of Via, An On-Line Communication Platform

Via is a Quebec based and developed product that allows people sitting at their computers to use webcams and microphones alongside their keyboards and monitors to communicate with each other for a variety of purposes in a variety of ways. Via can be used across a large scale of communication possibilities, from simple broadcasting of one person's voice to another individual or group, through a more complex communication scenario with several people exchanging ideas while viewing video feeds of each other's faces, and hearing each other's voices, as well as exchanging documents uploaded prior to the session and generating new text collaboratively using the whiteboard tool. Platform Via is an obvious match for educational application, students can use it to access on-line courses, teachers can use it to reach students or to collaborate with other teachers, and students can use it to facilitate group work inside or outside class time. It can be used within, between, and among institutions. To ensure the best use of Via as a pedagogical tool, we need to be proactive users of the interactive nature of this technology.

Platform Via — has the — pedigogical potential — is → learner centered → multi-modal — of a — Web 2.0 Interactive Learning Environment — means → information flows both directions — means → foster varied exchange — only when — used appropriately — before → proper set-up and planning — during → foster varied exchange — after → reflect on practices in an effort to improve

      I have been using Via for three years for giving and receiving professional development (APOP -the Association pour l'application des ordinateurs aux niveau post-secondaire, Performa -Professional Development for College Employees), committee meetings (mostly APOP), teacher planning and brainstorming sessions and in-class learning activities with cegep students (as part of the Sept-Iles Vanier Virtual Team Teaching Project, funded by Entente Canada Quebec). We are only beginning to imagine the possibilities for benefiting from on-line communication platforms as far as what situations can profit from this technology, but one thing is for sure, optimum use of a communication platform such as Via can only be realized through careful preparation before the session, thoughtful pedagogical sequencing and activities during the session, and careful debriefing after the session by leaders with an eye to improving their use of the environment.

Before: What to do in advance of your Via Session

1. **Prepare participants:** as more users appropriate the skills needed for on-line communication this element will become less significant, but in 2009 many people need to work through the process of configuring their audio-visual set-up and familiarizing themselves with the environment and tools available. This best occurs before the teaching/learning session. Short training tutorials that walk participants through the set-up and environment can really pay off in increased on-task time during the session.
2. **Send out the invitations:** Via will send an email with a link to the participants through which they can enter the session directly. They should also make a note of their Via username and password in case they need to access directly (for example, if they do not have access to their

internet account for some reason). It is a good idea to send out the invitation in advance, a week or two is sufficient, and it is an even better idea to send a reminder the day before or on the day of the activity. Via even provides the possibility of sending a video message to your invitees, this could liven up an otherwise ordinary email! Student groups can access their Via activity through a portal set up between your college and Via, this eliminates the email address stage on a large scale. We used the student's permanent codes as their user names to give them access to their accounts. Assign the appropriate rights to the participants.

3. Another useful arrangement for large groups is to **schedule a log-in period prior to the class start time**. The Performa "College Teaching: Issues and Challenges" course offered a one-hour log-in session previous to the start time for the 30 participants in its on-line debut and not surprisingly, it took the entire time to welcome participants. The Via session animator was in place to ask individuals to turn on their cameras and microphones, check configurations, -"did they have speakers on?" (This causes hideous echoes!) -and if so could they change their audio set-up by selecting their headsets, -"how was the volume on their microphones?" -too "hot", use the slide bar beside the icon to lower the volume, etc. Participants were each given the necessary rights and the class began right on time with very few technical glitches.

4. **Plan your activities:** Choosing the most interactive approach will maximize potential learning and take advantage of the web 2.0 (interactive) possibilities of the environment for participants. Prior to the session, create and upload a variety of support documents. These should facilitate the form and content of your session. Try creating a directive slide show to stimulate prior learning and engage your participants (PowerPoint -remember, this will be translated into PDF when it gets uploaded, so avoid animation and overlapping images). For example, you can compose a lead in question, and ask students to draw or write their response directly on the slide. During the session you will be able to use your curser tool to decipher who wrote what and respond to individuals and/or the group as a whole. Select your content documents and organize them in a logical order. Decide if you want to make documents accessible to the participants, or if they are just for viewing during the session. You can upload text documents, PDFs and videos. Prepare whiteboards and surveys prior to the session as these tools help you evaluate the comprehension and engagement of your listeners.
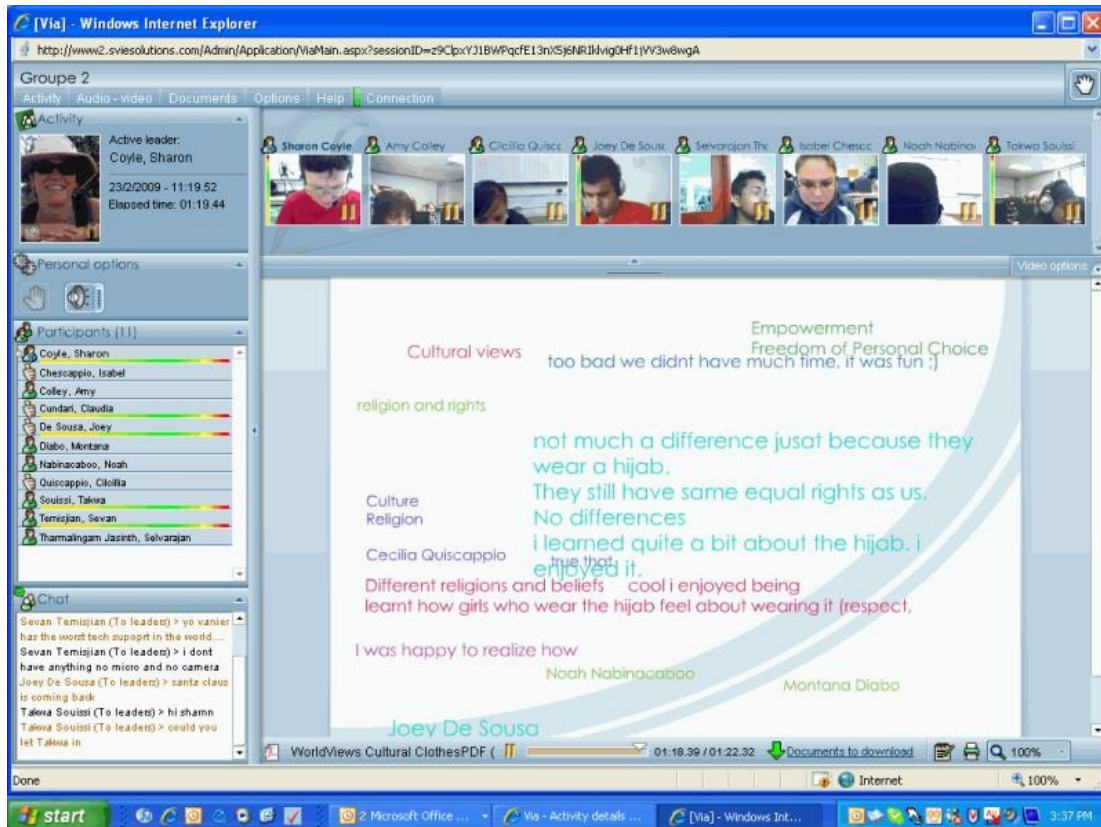
During: Taking advantage of the Via environment during the session

1. **Think of the computer station in front of you as an interface rather than a recording device.** This is a crucial opportunity to give and receive feedback in an effort to create a synergetic environment. Contrive situations for group discussion or input on topics that participants are sure to have something to contribute to. An example from our world views team teaching experience comes from a session held on February 23, 2009. 50 students, 15 from Cegep de Sept-Iles and 35 from Vanier College in Montreal were grouped in five small groups of ten students each, three from Sept-Iles, seven from Vanier. Each group had a teacher animator and a guest assigned to them. The topic of discussion was the reasoning behind the gesture of wearing the hijab (a head scarf worn by some Muslim women). The guests were four college aged muhajibah (women who wear the head scarf), and one young Muslim math teacher who offered to fill in for the fifth group as a resource person. Most Sept-Iles students had never spoken to anyone who was Muslim, and so had no personal experience with this topic. To lead them into the discussion, a series of increasingly pertinent interactive slides solicited their input and participation, starting with "draw your favourite article to clothing", proceeding to "what are some items of clothing -male or female- that you

find unreasonable", and moving on to "list some things people wear to show their culture or religion, or even their personality...", and so on, until the participants have assimilated enough information to respond to "what are some reasons for wearing the hijab?" Obviously it is crucial to have solid content to accompany the interactive slide shows; in this case the students were able to pose their questions to someone who could give answers from a personal perspective. They also had access to two slide show documents, one on a research study exploring the reasons Canadian women chose to wear the Hajib, and the other was a look at the Moroccan world view according to the young Muslim Math Teacher. It is hard to quantify the value of this experience for our students. I think of it as a "real-life" (or perhaps "real, live") interactive textbook.

(Example of an interactive slide)

List some things people wear to show their culture or religion, or even their personality...

(Example of a directional slide)

Activities

- View the two PowerPoints and put up your electronic hands to comment or ask questions.

- Listen to what the people in your group have to say about wearing the hijab.

- Turn on your cameras and microphones four people at a time. Maximize the video portion of your screen and share your thoughts about wearing the hijab and other related issues.

- Make a new whiteboard and have everyone write their questions about the hijab on it. Discuss possible answers as a group.

- Use the survey tool to find out what people think or know about issues you raise during the discussion.

2. Instead of asking one participant to give an answer to a question, **bring up a clean white board (or a pre-prepared whiteboard with a topic and possibly divisions). Ask all the students to write their responses simultaneously on this surface.** In his book on Neuroplasticity, *The Brain That Changes Itself*, Norman Doidge explains how the information and telecommunication network makes an excellent match with the human brain, who's neural pathways use electronic signals to transport information. He goes as far as to envision the human brain as being extended out into the world through the web. I propose the image of a "group brain" becoming visible on the whiteboard as participants type their thoughts onto the shared surface, all at the same time. I have seen this work with 30 students in the College Teaching: Issues and Challenges class. This alternative to a teacher asking a question to which one student at a time responds creates a situation where everyone is actively engaged, either writing their own response or reading other students' answers as they pour across the screen.

3. **Use the Status Bar indicators regularly.** *Thumbs Up* for "I agree", *Lightbulb* for "I understand", *Hand Up* for "I have a question". This is a quick way to see if your group has fallen asleep or perhaps drifted off to check their Hotmail account.
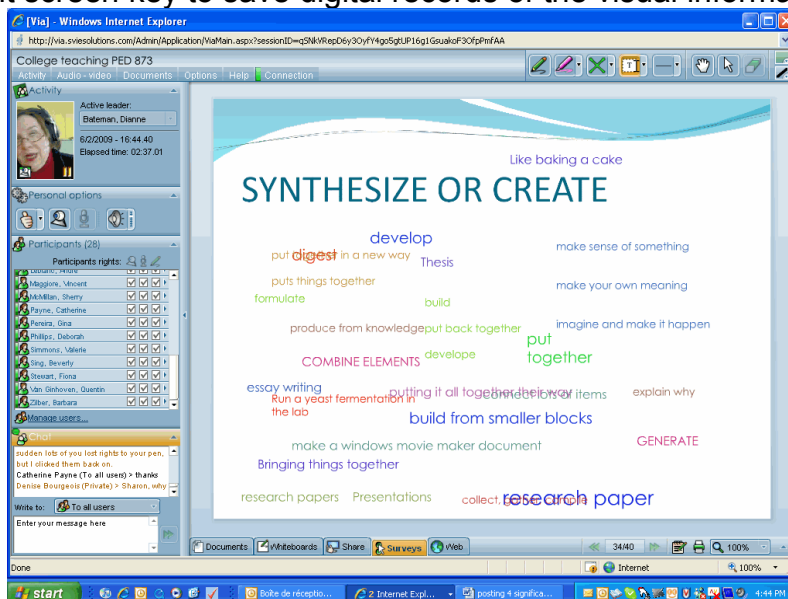
4. **Use the Survey tool.** You can use questions you save ahead of time, but you can also quickly type in a question as it comes up, either from your own thoughts, or from someone in the group. This is a graphic tool that presents ideas in a mode your visual learners will appreciate and remember.
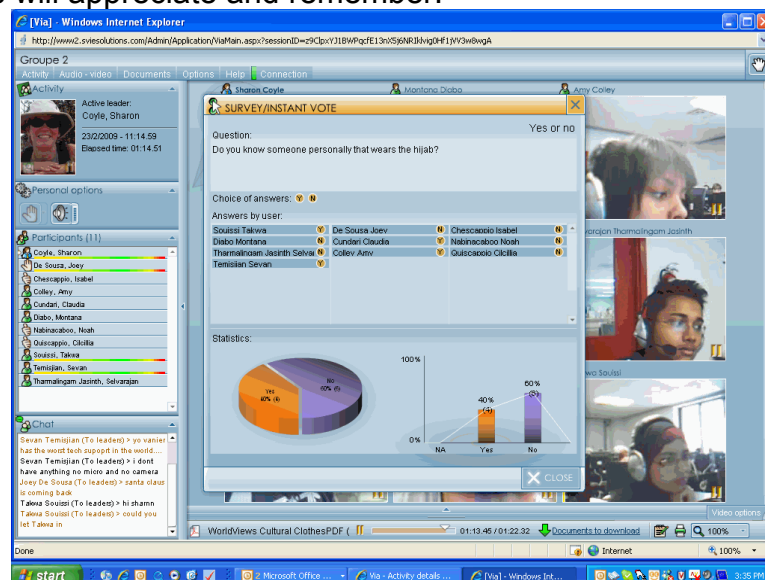
5. **Use the webcams.** Begin and end your session with a webcam check-in to give the group a sense of being physically present. Have individuals who ask questions turn on both their microphones and cameras while they talk. (Note: to avoid background noise and conserve bandwidth, it is a good idea in groups of more than four or five to ask participants to deactivate their camera and microphone when not directly interacting in the session.)
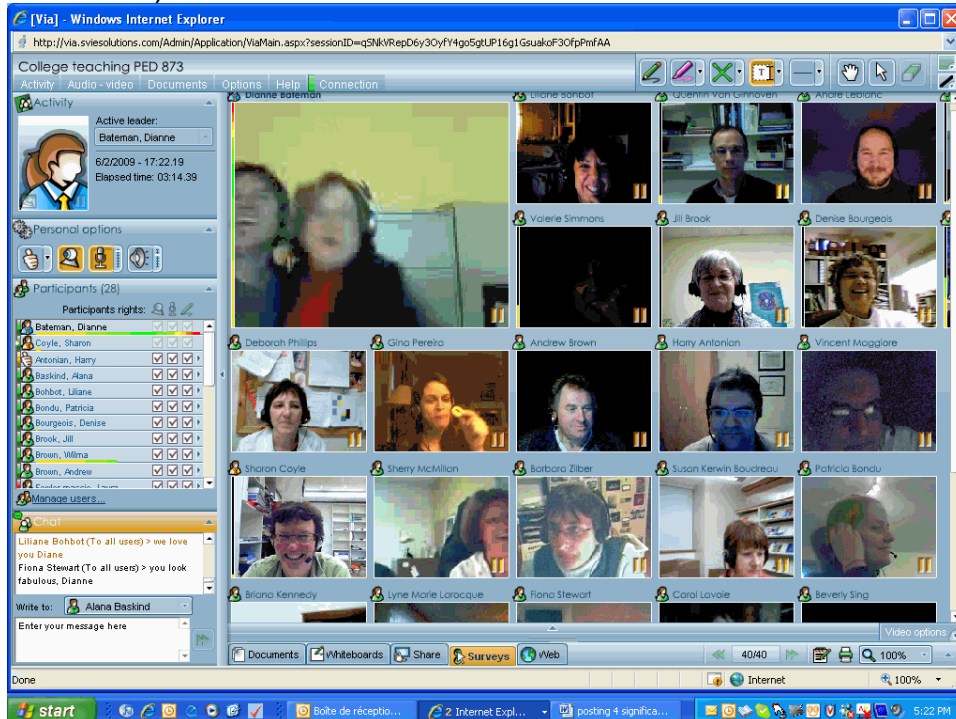
6. **Use the printer icon to make a record of whiteboards created or to save a visual document of the activity's participants.** You can also use the print screen key to save digital records of the visual information.

7. **Use screen sharing to demonstrate complex manipulations on your station.** Use the web referencing function to send participants to a specific site to explore or perform specific research tasks. You can leave your microphone on and guide them through a site, this results in more active engagement, but also has the liability of tempting participants to go off on a tangent.
8. Ask for help. There are a lot of things going on at the same time in a Via environment. If you are the presenter, **appoint an animator** to field problems in the chat window and check rights boxes from time to time if participants get ejected from the session.

After: Debriefing with an eye to improvement

1. **Remind students that they can watch the session in replay** mode for a limited time after the session is over (often about a week).
2. **Review several segments** of the session to get a sense of what worked best. Use the time bar to travel through the session to get a sense of the pacing.
3. **Get feedback** from participants as to what went well and what was frustrating.
4. **Brainstorm solutions to difficulties and set in place systems to repeat successful strategies.** In our Virtual Team Teaching project the debriefing sessions were crucial to maintaining communication and collating our double vision of what was happening.

Platform Via is an exceptionally interactive tool when used with solid preparation, diligent pedagogical implementation focusing on learner centered activities, and followed up with competent reflection. The key is to ensure user participation by taking advantage of the built-in web 2.0 possibilities. It is amazing to think that students and teachers can sit and share in an educational experience while separated by hundreds of kilometres. This environment can foster the same human connections, -humour, a sense of group, modeling metacognition- that we try to encourage in our face to face learning environments.

References

APOP, http://www.apop.qc.ca/ (APOP is a nonprofit professional association, established in 1982, working to promote the pedagogical integration of IT (Information Technology) into teaching and learning. APOP membership is made up primarily of faculty and technical, professional and administrative staff working in Québec's network of French and English-language public and private Colleges.)

Doidge, Norman. *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science.* New York: Viking, 2007. http://www.normandoidge.com/normandoidge/MAIN.html

Profweb, http://www.profweb.qc.ca/ "The Quebec College Crossroad for IT Integration."

Performa,**http://www.educ.usherbrooke.ca/quickplace/performap/main.nsf/h _Toc/4df38292d748069d05256708000167212/?OpenDocument** Professional Development for College Teachers For 30 years, PERFORMA has offered university-level professional development programs in college teaching.

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