eTools: Using Skype in the Classroom

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Introduction

Communication courses frequently require students to demonstrate verbal and nonverbal competence through oral presentations. This requirement can be challenging in online and hybrid settings that limit synchronous face-to-face communication. As video-streaming platforms gain prominence in professional and personal contexts, it is important for students to develop the skills to create and deliver effective mediated presentations. Skype is a tool that not only enables synchronous oral presentations in online courses, but also allows students to refine their tele-conferencing communication skills.

What is Skype?

Developed originally as a peer-to-peer voice transmission software program, Skype is a leading video chat platform that offers an array of free communication services, including video calls, Instant Messaging (IM), and chat with other Skype users. It operates well on devices that are equipped with a webcam and microphone, and is therefore compatible with most desktop and laptop models. In recent years, Skype also has expanded into mobile apps, making it compatible with cellphones, tablets, smart televisions, and other personal electronic devices. Skype for Business (which requires a Microsoft Office 365 subscription) offers additional enhanced features, such as real-time

meetings with up to 250 individuals, instant messaging anytime, PowerPoint upload, and meeting recording.

How can I get Skype for use in the classroom?

To download Skype, go to https://www.skype.com/en/download-skype/skype-for-computer/. Although the default operating system is Microsoft Windows, Skype offers versions of the software for Mac and Linux users. The Skype app also can be procured and installed through app vendors (e.g., Apple). While the Skype app is available at no cost to users, Skype for Business requires a monthly fee with two pricing plans. Online Plan 1 entails a yearly contact and costs $2 per user per month; Online Plan 2 costs $5.50 per user per month and provides additional features such as high-definition video group conferences, desktop sharing, and the ability to record meetings.

For classroom use, instructors and students must have access to devices that are equipped with a webcam and microphone. After creating a Skype account and logging in, instructors can add students as Contacts by entering their usernames and sending them a Contact request. Once students accept this request, both parties may IM, chat, or call one another whenever they are online. Once one course ends, instructors can delete existing Contacts and use the same account for another course.

How do I use Skype in the classroom?

In traditional, online, or hybrid formats, Skype can be used in communication courses to deliver presentations, monitor and critique one's communication behaviors,

and enhance social presence in distance-learning situations. More specifically, Skype can be used to:

1. *deliver speeches/presentations*. In online and hybrid courses, students can deliver speech presentations via Skype. Visual aids can be integrated seamlessly into a virtual presentation by using the share screens tool. Additionally, the group-viewing tool enables students to become a live "audience" for a given presenter and complete peer critiques (if required). Skype thus facilitates a communal public speaking environment in distance-learning contexts that are frequently characterized solely by individual effort.

2. *work in groups and complete group assignments*. The group video tool enables students to coordinate with one another and work on group assignments in real time. Live interaction, while especially valuable to build community sentiment between students in distance-learning contexts, can be useful in traditional courses for students to collaborate outside class.

3. *practice video-conferencing and interview skills.* In courses that emphasize professional communication skills, Skype can be used to simulate video conferences and job interviews. In the basic communication course, the generic persuasive speech assignment can be modified into an interview format that requires students to demonstrate ethos, pathos, and logos within a virtual contemporary persuasive context.

4. *hone nonverbal behavior for professional communication contexts*. During video calls, the Skype interface includes both the receiver's and the speaker's webcam images.

Speakers can therefore monitor their communication behaviors in real time (or later review a recorded conversation), which is especially useful when developing communication skills for interviews and other professional interactions.

5. *record and review completed presentations for reflective self-critique.* The recording feature is useful for students to record and later critique their presentations. Although video recording as a program feature is available only through Skype for Business, it is easy to locate online third-party tools to record calls for basic Skype. These tools include MP3 Skype Recorder 4.20, Free Video Call Recorder for Skype, and CallTrunk for Skype.

6. *conduct virtual office hours.* For quick inquiries that do not necessitate video calls, the IM and chat features allow instructors and students to ask and clarify brief questions, attach and submit files for feedback and review, and post links to external content.

Conclusion

An invaluable tool in the 21st century classroom, Skype provides a platform for synchronous communication among instructors and students--regardless of physical location--that enables students to monitor and hone their verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors. Skype's versatility across multiple devices and OS formats makes it easily accessible and effective for a range of purposes in any communication course.