Add a little Serious Magic to your next presentation

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Research in both educational theory and cognitive psychology tells us that visual learning is one of the best methods for teaching students of all ages how to think and how to learn. With this basic understanding, it is only natural that we teach and let students experience the power of visualization. Visualization can assist students to clarify their thinking, and to gather, organize and prioritize various forms of visual information. Empowering students and staff to employ visualization also helps stimulate creative thinking.

Computers and digital cameras make the production and distribution of images available to almost anyone at an incredible speed. More than any other technological innovation, these two technologies are responsible for the explosion in images. Today you can create digital images with your cell phone, PDA, and even a small wrist watch. More and more digital capture devices are allowing you to record both still and motion sequences. Today we have video cameras that take still pictures and still cameras that can record video sequences. This choice of either still or motion capture challenges us to think how we can best visualize what it is that we wish to show.

How can we manage all the digital visual information that is available to use as we plan and produce a presentation? Most presenters turn to Microsoft's PowerPoint presentation software to assist them in enhancing their presentation using various digital images. During this presentation you will observe the similarities and differences between Microsoft's PowerPoint and that of Visual Communicator software developed by Serious Magic. A basic difference between Power-Point and Visual Communicator is that Communicator does not provide the graphics capability such as word visuals or graphs. One key feature of both the Pro and Studio version of Visual Communicator is its ability to import your existing PowerPoint files. This compatibility makes is very easy and efficient to convert your PowerPoint presentation into a dynamic narrated video by simply using a basic camcorder along with Visual Communicator. Most PowerPoint presentations are given before a live audience and narrated, but not recorded by the presenter. Visual Communicator is chiefly designed to digitally record a presentation, even though the latest studio version provides for speaker-controlled live presentations. With today's need to provide information or presentations online for easy access, Visual Communicator is a simple way to create a video stream or file that can be linked to a web page. Visual Communicator's focus is on recording the digital graphics along with the audio and video of the presenter. The graphical interface design of Visual Communicator is the digital version of the traditional paper based "storyboard." With visual communicator you drag and drop your visuals along a timeline that is locked to your complete narration. The timeline, narration, and visuals scroll together to provide a synchronized teleprompter for the presenter.

The recent popularity growth of e-portfolios among colleges has sparked the need for students to develop a digital story telling ability to provide faculty and employers with a better representation of what they have learned and experienced during their study. The term "Digital Story Telling" is defined by Bernajean Porter as," taking the ancient art of oral storytelling and engaging a palette of technical tools to weave personal tales using images, graphics, music, and sound mixed together with the author's own story voice." Modern digital authoring technology provides the features necessary to produce a content-focused message that is self-directed (presenter controlled). If software technology is going to effectively assist us and our students in telling our story, it must provide a simple way to bring the presenter and digital information together into a fluid and seamless presentation, without becoming technophile and without using a studio filled with equipment and production staff. Software programs that support this need are either so basic that they don't have the power and features to accomplish the job, or they are so complex that they are hard to use and apply. Visual Communicator is one of the software products that strike a balance between ease of use and a variety of powerful features.

Planning a presentation around the capabilities of a software program such as Visual Communicator requires the user to apply good visual literacy. Students are required to combine their verbal and video message along with many other visualization options into a coherent and effective presentation. Visual Communicator helps defeat the talking head syndrome along with the human less PowerPoint talkie. Students who have used Visual Communicator in producing a digital story for an e-portfolio comment on the challenge in making the video, the reward of seeing the impact of their final presentation, and the power of the medium.

At North Dakota State College of Science freshman and sophomore college students are encouraged to plan well in advance of presenting their e-portfolios by gathering digital visuals that can be incorporated into their final production. In order to better plan and understand, students need to see examples and how the final process (Visual Communicator) works. This is not to say that students need to master the use of the software, but rather need to decide what to use and how will it work within the software.

Up to this time, a staff member has helped students place their digital information into the software and assisted them in managing the program. Even though the learning curve for Visual Communicator is reasonable, it was decided that the student's time could be better spent developing their verbal message and visual reinforcement. As students in other departments begin to utilize video in their e-portfolios, we would highly recommend that a student employee be trained in the operation of the software and therefore assists other students in efficiently applying the software.

Students find it challenging to develop a written script that they can easily read and that represents the way they would extemporaneously speak. Most students find it very difficult to relax and read their script while incorporating simple non-verbal facial communications. Showing students short clips of local and national news anchors can assist them to seem more relaxed and appear to be talking rather than reading to the camera. This on-camera recording also provides the students with a self evaluation of their appearance and how well they appear to communicate to others.

The power of the current Pentium processor has allowed software developers, such as Serious Magic to replace thousands of dollars worth of video production hardware with Visual Communicator software, thus making professional visualization capabilities such as chroma keying, teleprompting, and mixing visuals into live video available at a fraction of the cost. By utilizing chroma keying technology presenters can interact with their visuals to better emphasize their messages and at the same time remain on-screen to maintain a more humanistic approach that is sometimes lacking through distance delivery techniques. The teleprompter feature of this software provides a professional (those who make their living in front of video cameras) looking product by allowing the presenter to maintain natural eye contact with the video lens while delivering a well scripted message. The teleprompter script timeline in Visual Communicator also provides a way of coordinating the precise timing for visuals to appear on the entire screen or along with the presenter.

The digital studio in a box, Visual Communicator, can work on any Windows-based computer and webcam or camcorder to merge live video with complex transitions, titles, graphics, and virtual backgrounds. The entire system can be as simple as a laptop and an inexpensive webcam, or as sophisticated as a desktop workstation, firewire digital camcorder, and a Holoset chroma key system. Depending or your needs, Visual Communicator is available in three versions from the inexpensive web version for producing Internet compatible video files such as Real and Windows Media, to the Studio version that provides a large array of professional features including three camera inputs and full screen live output for speaker support.

The following is a comparison chart of the three software versions of Visual Communicator.

Visual Communicator 2 Version Comparison Chart

	VC 2 Web	VC 2 Pro	VC 2 Studio
Base Features			
Visual Communicator software and manual	x	x	x
Real-time green-screen functionality	x	x	x
Foldable green-screen backdrop material	x	x	x
Professional-quality clip-on microphone	x	x	x
Built in Teleprompter	x	x	x
Flex Recording	x	x	x
In-Place Trimming	x	x	x
On-The-Fly Editing	x	x	x
Audio Fade In/Out	x	x	x
Review Anywhere	x	x	x

Real-Time Scrubbing	x	x	x
Output Format and Resolutions			
Publish standard AVI video files (uncompressed)	x	x	x
Publish Internet-ready videos (Windows Media / Real)	x	x	x
Web resolution (320 x 240) for websites, email and streaming	x	x	x
Publish video-embedded web pages. Choose from numerous web page templates to coordinate the graphics with your video.	x	x	x
High resolution (720 x 480) for video projectors, TV, CD-ROMs, recordable DVDs and corporate/educational networks		x	x
DV output for direct print-to-tape to DV camcorders		x	x
Live video streaming to the internet			x
Live Full-Screen Output to Other Monitor, Projector, TV or VCR			x
Advanced Features			
Integrate web links to "trigger" graphics, web pages or slides	x	x	x
Add chapters to your videos	x	x	x
Turn PowerPoint shows into narrated videos		x	x
Pro FX - over 100 instantly customizable video effects such as tubes, blinds and rotating wedges		x	x
MegaMove FX - pan, tilt, zoom and fly-by motions including position, rotation, reflection, shadow & more		x	x
Spark FX - unique effects based on animated particles such as fire, smoke and sparks		x	x
Pro template and media library - 50% more style templates & 100 royalty-free graphics & music tracks		x	x
Multiple camera support			x
Integrate charts, graphs and slides (OLE objects)			x
Full screen teleprompter capability			x
Expanded graphics library			x
Advanced peel effects			x

Serious Magic makes the following Visual Communicator version recommendations based on your school's needs.

You need Visual Communicator Web if:
- You want students to conduct project-based learning in the classroom only.
- You want a few graphic themes but primarily will use your own content and backgrounds.
- You want to post presentations to a Website or burn to a CD only.

You need Visual Communicator Pro if:
- You want students to conduct project-based learning in the classroom and give them the ability to share with their family.
- You want to import PowerPoint presentations into a Visual Communicator video project.
- You want more themes, soundtracks, and special effects.
- You want to post presentations to a Website and to burn to a CD & DVD.

You need Visual Communicator Studio if:
- You want to create live morning announcements that allow you to directly plug into your Channel 1, closed-circuit system.
- You want students to conduct project-based learning in the classroom and give them the ability to share with their family.
- You want to import PowerPoint presentations into a Visual Communicator video project.
- You want a lot more themes, soundtracks, and special effects.
- You want to stream video presentations live over the Internet.
- You want robust Web features to conduct distance learning and/or online training for professional development.
- You want to create interview-style talk shows with multiple cameras.
- You want to post presentations to a Website, burn to a CD & DVD.3

The North Dakota State College of Science has found a niche need for this product in producing student e-portfolios, and recording short supportive message from our Deans and Vice Presidents on college issues. Several college friends and alumni wrote their own script and were recorded to lend support to a capital fund drive. Using their own words and Visual Communicator's tele-prompter, those beyond the age of eighty provided outstanding testimonials in short video clips that were incorporated into a PowerPoint presentation. The president of the college has used Visual Communicator to record short messages for student recruitment, to inform staff on critical issues, and to provide a video substitute at functions she is unable to attend.

When working with students and others who are uncomfortable presenting in front of a video camera, this software provides the tools necessary to allow them to focus on *what* they want to say, *how* they want to say it, and *how* they want to visually enhance that message with various titles, photos, graphics, and video. Whether you have a need to record a visually supported self directed e-portfolio… or to communicate a precise high impact message, using Visual Communicator can help you achieve that goal without a major investment in technology.

References

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