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## XplanaVoice 1.0 Whitepaper

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# **The Voice of Reason: Voice-Based Discussion Boards in Online Courses**

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## Introduction

Technological innovations that extend the boundaries of communication erupt onto the market daily. The ways in which we communicate are constantly evolving from Instant Messaging to text messaging to using PDAs. Budding communication technologies enable us to contact friends and family virtually anytime, anywhere with the sole limitation of typing speed.

However, as people sustain relationships and communication through technological means, verbal communication is becoming an antiquated notion. But it is through speaking, listening and conversing with others that most people effectively learn and distribute information. In addition, human interaction and voice-based technology express emotion, humor and emphasis in ways that PDAs, IM and text messages cannot.

While speech and communication are integral parts of the learning process in a traditional classroom, the necessity for verbal communication is significantly more substantial for online courses. In a virtual classroom comprised of students attending class from scattered locations around the globe, the ability to communicate through speech and to convey self-expression narrows the distance gap while simultaneously building a community.

## What is a Voice-Based Discussion Board?

A voice-based message board is an enhanced version of a standard online message board. Rather than just posting text-based messages and replies, users have the option of posting voice and/or text messages. Through the use of a basic microphone, users can record posts in order to accurately reflect their emotional reaction to a topic or post. In addition, students can edit their own posts or access all posts at any time. Voice-based discussion boards allow a traditional classroom debate to transfer into the virtual classroom.

## Why Voice-Based Discussion Boards?

In today's fast-paced world marked by social Darwinism, those who succeed are often the most educated. However, a catch-22 is present in today's business world: chances of advancing your position within a company are greatly increased if you have a an MA or PhD, but in order to obtain a degree you often have to take time off of work. The solution to this quandary often lies in e-learning and online courses.

Online courses provide unique opportunities for those whom traditional degree programs are inconvenient. However, despite the many advantages to online courses, there are the inevitable pitfalls. The most widely criticized aspect of e-learning is the communication barrier that exists without the physical presence of an instructor or peers. Collaborative learning in general is also somewhat restricted, and where in-class discussion formerly promoted deeper thinking and heated debate, there now exists bland discussion boards that lack the passion that drives classroom debates. In order to promote collaborative learning and thought-provoking class discussions, a more advanced means of communication is imperative.

A voice-based discussion board breaks down the communication barrier and establishes a lively forum for the exchange of ideas. With a voice-board, students convey their outraged dissent or impassioned defense of a posted topic with the same emotion apparent in a classroom discussion. True feelings are exposed through speech, whereas emotion, humor and sarcasm are not always evident in posted messages on traditional text-based discussion boards. The integration of voice-based discussion boards in online courses fosters communication and incites thought-provoking class debates on par with classroom debates, if not better.

Not only do voice-based discussion boards encourage lively debate, they also allow students to exhibit their personalities in a somewhat anonymous environment. Though online courses attempt to showcase personalities through the use of avatars and emoticons, an online course maintains a somewhat impersonal feel. However, emotions and personality truly shine through speech. A lot is revealed through a person's speech pattern, word choices, tone and voice. A voice-board and voice-email system allow students to interact more effectively and cultivate relationships, which increases the comfort level of the virtual classroom while inspiring collaborative learning.



While an increased sense of community is an important advantage of using voice-boards in online courses, the benefits extend beyond basic communication. As e-learning expands to meet the needs of a flourishing market, so will the numbers and types of courses offered. In today's multicultural society, it is often beneficial to be proficient in a second or even third language. Online courses allow working people to enroll in language classes and develop their skills without the restrictions of inconvenient class schedules and locations. However, the key to truly mastering a language (or even the basics) is speaking the language as much as possible. The incorporation of a voice-based discussion board into a language course vastly improves the quality and efficacy of the course. The voice-board allows students to record their pronunciation to which instructors can provide oral feedback. For disciplines such as Modern Languages and Communication, a voice-board is essential. As online courses expand in scope, proper features such as a voice-board are necessary for an optimal learning experience.

An optimal learning experience is defined by an instructor's ability to effectively appeal to all learning styles. In recent years, an emphasis has been placed on the importance of varying classroom instruction to address the multiple intelligences established in Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences in addition to the various types of learning styles-- audio, visual and tactile/kinesthetic. The inclusion of a voice-board in an online course appeals to audio learners who learn best by listening to others. However, for those who continue to learn best by writing down information, the voice-board is equipped with the option to submit text-based posts, voice-based posts or a combination of both. This flexibility in design facilitates learning for all learning styles.

## Market Forces

Though online courses were first viewed as suspicious or a fluke, it is becoming increasingly evident that they will remain a fixture in many institutions of higher learning for years to come. Traditional brick-and-mortar educations demand a flexibility that many eager learners do not possess. Working professionals, parents and students with conflicting class times who wish to advance their education do not have the option of uprooting their lives to attend classes at inconvenient times or locations. Online classes enable people to reap the educational benefits of a traditional course from the comfort of their own home at their own pace.

From community colleges to Cornell and Columbia, online courses are creeping into the mainstream and emerging as credible learning alternatives to the traditional classroom. According to the 2003 Sloan Survey of Online Learning, 81% of all institutions of higher education offer at least one blended or fully online course, while 97% of public institutions boast at least one online or blended degree program. As the interest and participation in online courses intensifies, so will the need for eminent LMS and online courses that outshine even the traditional classroom experience. Integrated learning tools that allow instructors to imitate the traditional learning environment and then improve upon that idea for online courses will further heighten interest in e-learning options. Voice-based message boards and email are the first step in perfecting online courses through the development of an online community established on the foundation of open communication and verbal interaction.

## Standards

Though the notion of a voice-based discussion board is by no means innovative, the actual creation and practical application of one is. Wimba's EduVoice product suite currently dominates the market with its real-time conference capability, email system and voice-message board. Wimba set the standards for voice-based communication tools, flaunting a voice board formatted so that students can access voice posts at any time. Wimba also initiated the inclusion of a voice-email system within a course. Though Wimba's products are monumentally influential in regards to e-learning, they lack a cohesive element that ties all the voice-based features together neatly.



## Why XplanaVoice?

XplanaVoice is an asynchronous voice-based communication tool constructed from Flash technology. This revolutionary learning tool tears down the communication barriers that mar online courses and establishes direct communication among students as well as between student and instructor. XplanaVoice equips students with the means to communicate naturally with their peers through the power of speech. The ingenuity of a 2-in-1 voice-based email system and discussion board coupled with a competitive price illustrates Xplana Learning's trailblazing vision for the future of education.

What truly distinguishes XplanaVoice as an exceptional product is its superior grade-book capabilities when integrated with XplanaCourse. XplanaVoice's automatic grading capabilities are an instructor's dream. Grading for XplanaVoice assignments is calculated based on number of posts or duration of posts. XplanaVoice then automatically calculates the grade and sends it to the grade-book to be recorded. Though this function of XplanaVoice is a valuable asset to frazzled instructors, the option exists for teachers to grade assignments manually as well.

In addition to serving as a threaded voice-based message board on which instructors can post topics to which students reply by a voice, text or combination post, XplanaVoice also functions as an internal voice-based email system. Students can send private voice-mails to classmates regarding specific posts on the discussion board, class projects or nothing more than a friendly hello. The internal email system is actually part of XplanaVoice, so students can easily email other students or the instructor about a particular post without a constant back-and-forth to the message board.

As with all Xplana Learning products, XplanaVoice is easily customizable to accommodate an instructor's needs. XplanaVoice integrates flawlessly with other Xplana Learning products such as XplanaCourse and XplanaWorkbook, Xplana's own Learning Management System and true-to-page digital representation of a printed workbook. This flexibility and scalability in design is truly unique in that XplanaVoice also easily integrates with other LMS such as BlackBoard and WebCT. Other outstanding features include:

- **Easy Log-In and Tracking** Within XplanaCourse, users log-in and have easy access to their personal profile and voice-mail inbox.
- **Navigation** Despite the hi-tech functionality of XplanaVoice, the tool is extremely simple to follow. A main page displays the categories and topics, and clicking on a topic displays the relevant posts. From here, a student can easily view posts or reply to posts without ever getting lost.
- **Organization of Content** All posts and content are neatly organized in category folders which contain individual topics and links to relevant posts. This simple and effective sorting technique prevents students and instructors alike from ever becoming confused.
- **Administration** Options Instructors wield maximum control over XplanaVoice. Instructors can view a comprehensive list of students and submissions that highlights posts that directly correspond to a particular assignment. Instructors can assign grades and respond to posts publicly on the board or privately via voice-mail.



- **Grades** Instructors assign grades manually or based on number or duration of posts. When XplanaVoice is used within XplanaCourse, grading by number or duration of posts is calculated automatically by XplanaVoice.
- **Assignments** Assignment creation is as simple as selecting a topic category, titling an activity and providing brief instructions.
- **Post Creation** To reply to a post, students simply select “reply” or “post,” fill in the subject, record a message and press “send.” Students can even preview the message prior to submission.
- **Post Editing** Students can edit their own posts at any time.
- **Public/Private Posts** XplanaVoice offers students the choice of submitting posts publicly to the message board for all classmates to hear/view or privately to an individual classmate or the instructor through voice email.
- **Customizable Email Inbox** Within XplanaVoice, each student has his or her own inbox for voice-emails. The inbox can be modified to suit student tastes in terms of display options.
- **Audio Features** XplanaVoice boasts exceptional sound quality in addition to an easy-to-follow set-up that features standard audio-player buttons such as “record,” “play,” and “stop.”
- **Integration With Other Products** XplanaVoice integrates seamlessly with XplanaCourse and XplanaWorkbook resulting in an unsurpassed learning experience.



## Concluding Thoughts

As online courses and e-learning become increasingly visible forces in higher education, the advancement of technology to provide the best online education possible is urgent. Through XplanaVoice, Xplana Learning strives to maximize the learning potential for online courses and foster a connected online community. Xplana Learning's XplanaVoice and other educational software products serve as advanced learning solutions for modern educational demands.

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