



A review of Nearpod – an interactive tool for student engagement

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I first encountered Nearpod some seven to eight years ago. At that time, I was mainly working with postgraduate students undertaking a Master of Science programme in Health Professional Education. I had to teach them how to teach. My preferred style of the time was to engage in a dialogue with students and by facilitating questions and their thoughts on the material under discussion, I would use a drawing board to develop concept maps and other visual tools to explain the material, theories and application of them. Using a presentation tool (PowerPoint being the most popular at the time) was not really my favoured approach – not least because of the work made famous by Tufte (2006) highlighting criticisms of its use. However, when it came to teach about 'lecturing', I role modelled the approach with the students as best I could. I remember one session where a student came up to me at the end of the class and said, 'please don't use PowerPoint again, it stifles you, we much prefer you facilitating'. I had found that a presentation tool such as PowerPoint became a little prescriptive and removed some of the spontaneity, interaction and engagement that comes from other forms of presenting, hence it was not my preferred approach.

I went to the Nearpod workshop as I was always interested in at least observing new platforms in action, if not actually using them. I remember enjoying the workshop and seeing the possibilities inherent in the tool. Here was a presentation tool that could enhance the delivery by the teacher showing slides/projections from the front of the class (the sage on the stage) by streaming it onto the smart devices that students were now constantly bringing into class with them. Donald Bligh once famously suggested that lectures are "periods of time during which the notes of the lecturer are transferred to the notebook of the students without going through the brains of either" (Bligh, 2000, p. 34). However, I observed that it did much more. Included in the platform were opportunities to not only provide the slides onto a medium that students could engage with without needing to write down, take photographs of the screen, or ask for points to be repeated and going back to previous slides. Moreover, the interactive exercises available and polls gave opportunities for everyone to be engaged in providing synchronous information and feedback on levels of understanding, and a platform for asking questions with some anonymity where they may have been more reticent in doing in larger settings.

In my efforts to use Nearpod I did set up a couple of sessions and presentations which takes the same amount of consideration and time that any other presentation tool would use. However, as my role had moved into a more senior leadership position, I found my volume of teaching was reduced and I eventually left Nearpod behind. Three years ago, I moved laterally for an opportunity not to be missed, directing a programme in a transnational education setting. Here I was now faced with large numbers of undergraduate students where the keynote lectures were a fundamental part of the delivery. This meant returning to presentation style. As my imperative is to develop critically thinking students and wanting to produce an experience for students by being engaging and interactive, I wanted an approach where I could convey material whilst involving them actively in their learning experience without having to put on a full Elton John concert type extravaganza. The students I found myself working with had the ability for critical thinking yet other than a small minority in the large group, were very reticent in relation to ask questions for clarification or challenge even when presented with opportunities to explicitly do so (in such a situation of silence I would normally say 'a question I am usually asked is....' then answer the question myself). As I looked around the lecture room at students more engaged with their devices than the screen, I remembered Nearpod and felt it was time I revisited it in order to take control of the devices students were already using in class for purpose of meeting the learning outcomes of the sessions.

Nearpod can be found at <https://nearpod.com/>. It is a cloud-based application with a relatively easy to use interface. Students and audiences can access the lessons with any smart device or computer/PC. It can be used synchronously or asynchronously. Nearpod provides the flexibility for the educator to shift amongst presentation/ lecture mode, to individual and group activities (Perez, 2017).

In presentation mode there is scope to design your own slides within the application itself or upload current PowerPoint, PDF and image files (with a user-friendly drag and drop facility). As well as basic content, it also allows you to add web content and various activities such as quizzes and polls (see Figure 1).

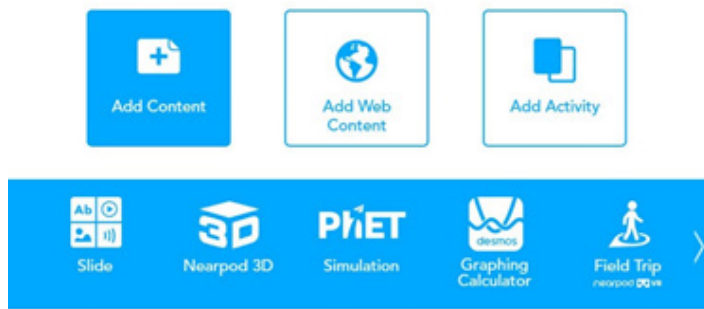


Figure 1: Add Content.

Within the 'Add Content' section, as well as creating slides as you might in other presentation software or uploading files, there are options to include a 'Flocabulary' video from a select menu: 'Nearpod 3D' (a selection of interactive rotational 3D images from a variety of categories); and 'PHET' interactive simulation activity (such as building fractions, from a number of subject categories). There is a 'Field Trip' option (a number of interactive panoramic images of interesting subjects such as the planet Mars). A 'Graphing Calculator' to produce mathematical graphs. There are 'BBC videos' which can be selected from a range of categories. Sway presentations can be selected as can YouTube and other videos. There is an audio option, a PDF viewer and facility for live twitter stream.

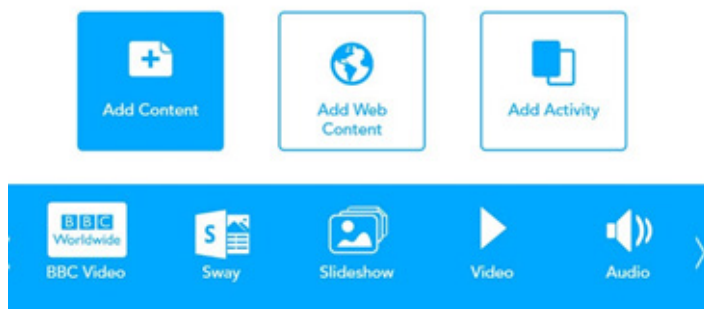


Figure 2: More Content Choices.

In the 'Add Web Content' there is the simple option of adding URLs that you feel may be useful as part of your lesson. There is a warning however, that some websites using 'Flash'

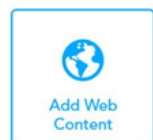


Figure 3: Adding Web Content.

As a teacher I have been able to use the add web content section to direct the students to my University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) where they can further engage with material within that system also.

In the 'Add Activity' there are choices to include questions and quizzes. These can be open ended, or multiple choice. There is a 'Matching Pairs', a 'Fill in the Blanks', a 'Memory Test' and a 'Draw It' facility also. It also gives the students opportunity to collaborate and post their feedback as well as being able to participate in polls (See Figure 4). These can be

prepared beforehand, or if you are working synchronously, they can be created on the spot. I have found this to be one of the most useful aspects of Nearpod. Although the teacher can see who posts certain questions and answers, it appears anonymous to those in the student space. Therefore, students that might not necessarily ask a question or offer an answer out loud and physically in front of a full class, are empowered to do so using this platform. This gives the teacher opportunities to address these aspects. I also use this if I'm working synchronously and notice a lull in energy within the group. An activity almost always helps to re-energise students and to re-focus them. The number of features does vary with the package and pricing plan chosen.

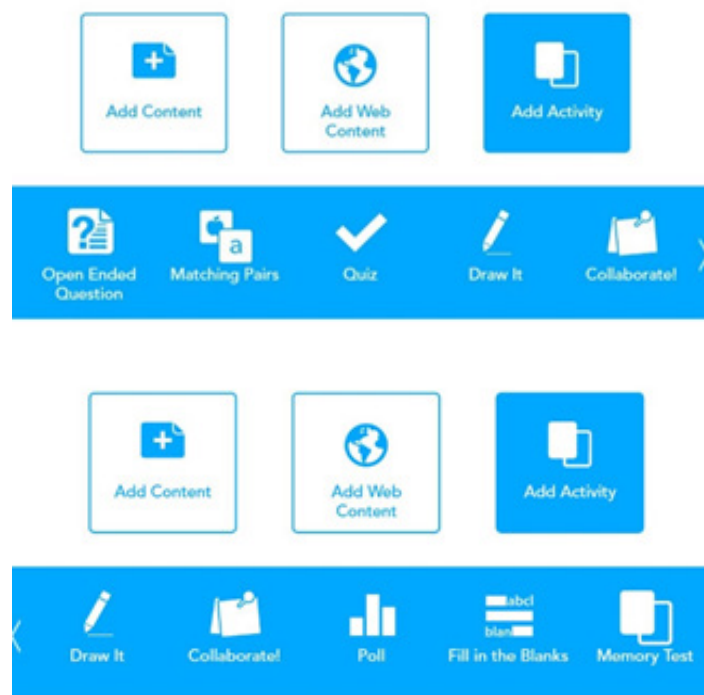


Figure 4: Adding Activities.

In order to access the session either synchronously or asynchronously, students are provided with a code to use when entering the site in order to join the specific lesson. Students can access this on their devices and there is a facility for them to make notes (which are then emailed to them or saved as per their specification, see Figure 5) on each slide.

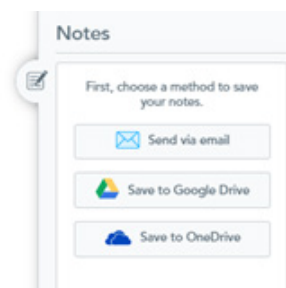


Figure 5: Notes Function

Whilst the activities are taking place the teacher has options to share the answers or not with the group. These data provide the teacher with a live figure of how students are doing in

either their participation or performance in certain activities. It is a useful tool to gauge the pace of your presentation and lecture and whether to change approach. However, the large benefit is providing students an anonymous platform in which to ask questions or raise challenges.

Another brilliant thing about Nearpod from a teacher's perspective is that once these sessions are finished, you are able to generate a report on the session which is emailed to you as a PDF (see Figure 6).

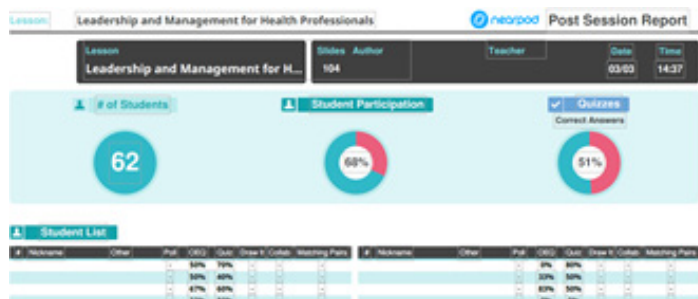


Figure 6: Report Facility.

This report gives an account of all of the activities involved including student responses and scores, levels of participation, questions asked and all written interactions.

There are a number of levels of packages available. Silver, Gold, Platinum, School and District Edition, and Higher Education. Silver is free but limits the accessibility to 50 students. More numbers can be included as the pricing and level of plan increases. As does access to a wide range of accessible lessons in a range of subject areas and grade levels as well as other teacher resources such as webinars and subject plans. The pricing plans can be found here: <https://nearpod.com/pricing>. As well as accessing the website there are also app versions available on some platforms.

In conclusion, I found that using Nearpod to present with assists in increasing student engagement. Where previously students might have been reticent to speak out in front of their peers in class, they now can ask questions anonymously, and hopefully the teacher can provide the answers. It gives the teacher the same resources as other presentation tools but much more including live polls, so background knowledge probes and minute answer tests can be conducted. It provides the teacher with live updates of participation from students and access to a number of video and online resources. In my lessons, students have evaluated this well in the main, except for one or two students that do not like using technology in the classroom. However, in my opinion it is a great way for the teacher to encourage students to use their mobile devices for active learning within sessions as opposed to being present but not participating whilst accessing their devices for social media and other entertainments. It can be challenging to set up in the first instance, but once used to the interface and the resources within it, it becomes no more difficult than using other slideware presentation tools and provides more flexibility.

References

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