



Wimba Builds Community at Grand Rapids Community College

"Wimba Pronto is an exciting tool because it lets students connect in an instant way. With Pronto, our students better connect with each other and better with their instructors."

-Eric Kunnen, Coordinator of Instructional Technologies, Grand Rapids Community College

Located in Western Michigan, Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) is a two-year community college serving more than 15,000 students per semester. One of the leading community colleges in the United States, GRCC offers a wide curriculum that caters to its diverse student base. GRCC students range from the traditional 18-21 year old college-age student, to working adults who are learning new skills in order to advance their careers. GRCC offers many credits options and happily reports that many of its students are able to eventually transfer to four-year colleges in order to complete their Bachelor's degrees. And in order to maintain its lofty stature among community colleges, GRCC boasts an aggressive technology program to ensure its students are ready for the workforce – a technology program that has relied on Wimba for several years.

GRCC instructors use Wimba Pronto to foster spontaneous, informal communication among students, and depend on Wimba Voice to do everything from teach foreign languages to record podcasts in Philosophy courses. Both Wimba products seamlessly integrate into Blackboard.

"GRCC has always been ahead of the curve in terms technology," says Bernard Manker, Professor of Spanish, who has been at GRCC for years and heads the Department of Language and Thought. Manker relies on Wimba Voice to allow his students to easily practice speaking and listening to Spanish. "When I go to conferences around the country and tell similar institutions that we have Wimba, they're impressed."

Manker typically records a paragraph in Spanish on a Wimba Voice Board to which he then has his students listen and then respond. This allows his students to improve their listening comprehension as well as their speaking skills. As Manker says, it's useless if a student can ask a question but not understand the response.

"The reaction to Wimba Voice has been very positive because students can practice listening before they take a test. With Wimba Voice, Spanish becomes immediate, it's real. They can hear the language, they can use the language, and before that wasn't possible without go-



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WIMBA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

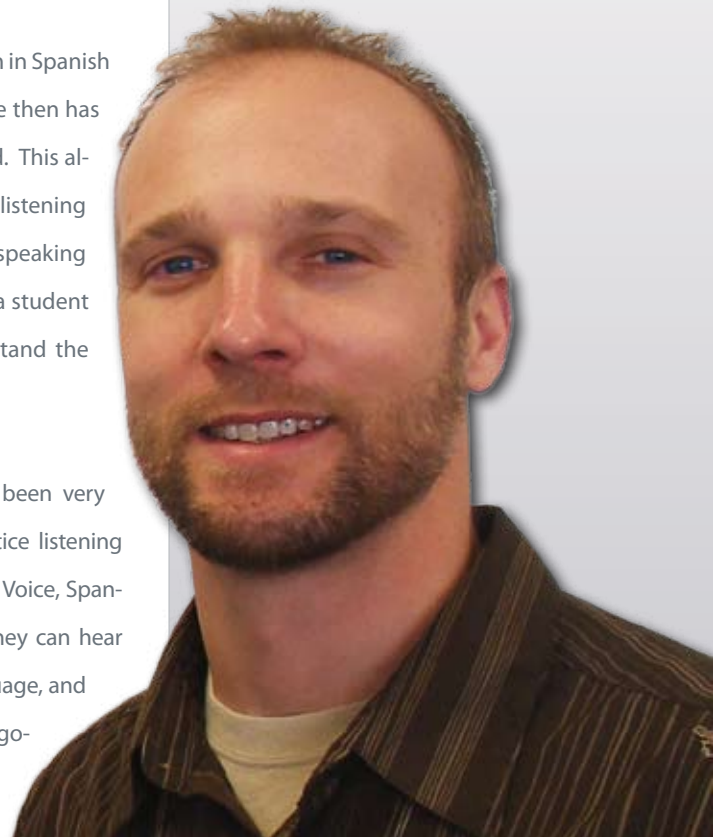
- Wimba Pronto
- Wimba Voice

KEY BENEFITS

- Improved grades by using Wimba Voice Boards in language courses
- Students feel connected to the college community
- Immediate feedback when studying

Eric Kunnen

Coordinator of Instructional Technologies, Grand Rapids Community College





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BETTER GRADES WITH WIMBA

"Now, [with Wimba], when students come in to take a test, they've prepared and get an improved grade."

*-Bernard Manker, Professor of Spanish,
Grand Rapids Community College*

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Though Wimba Voice is predominantly used in GRCC's foreign language courses, the Wimba Podcaster and the Wimba Voice Recorder have made their ways into numerous other disciplines. For example, the Wimba Voice Recorder is used in business and computer courses while the Wimba Podcaster is used in Philosophy and Ethics courses.

Dan Anderson, an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, predominantly uses the Wimba Podcaster to record podcasts that supplement his textbooks. He feels that recording his own podcasts allows him to reiterate important points and emphasize the information that is most critical for his students. He also understands that many philosophical theories are difficult to understand, so he thinks his own voice allows him to clarify ideas for his students. For example, in a recent class about Emmanuel Kant, he repeated several key phrases three times each within a podcast in order to drive home a point. And he also understands that teaching with new technology can be fun.

"We're reading Buddhists and Hindu scriptures, but it's got to be fun for the students. I added reverb to my voice and it sounded like it came from a monastery," he says.

Anderson also believes that the Wimba Podcaster plays a vital role in preparing his students for life after school. "Oral communication is so important in the workplace but many community colleges aren't preparing their students for the real world because so much of a student's grade depends on writing. I use Wimba Voice to give my students another outlet in which to shine."

Kaylie Alexander, a sophomore at GRCC who will transfer to CSU, Long Beach in Fall 2008 to complete her Bachelor's degree, knows she learned better from Anderson since he started creating podcasts. "There's a lot of stuff that's not in the textbook so [Professor Anderson] will go into Wimba and add more information," she says. "It helps me a lot to go back through and listen to his podcasts. When I read Philosophy I don't always comprehend it, but when it's on Wimba I can go back and listen to it as much as I want. It helps me hear different aspects of everything."

And when it comes to ease-of-use, instructors and staff believe Wimba Voice couldn't be easier.

"Any good tool that's effective doesn't get in the way of the task you're trying to accomplish," says Jeff Kissinger, Manager of GRCC's Language Arts computer labs. "When people come into my lab toward the end of school around exam time, they already have stress on them because it's finals. The last thing they need is for the technology to fail them, and I never hear anyone ever say, 'Wimba doesn't work.' They're dealing with content while they're in my lab, not Wimba. I think Wimba Voice has changed how I see things a lot. Wimba doesn't get in the way of the learning."

Wimba Pronto, the school-centric instant messenger, is also a fixture at GRCC. Perfect for spontaneous, informal communication, Wimba Pronto allows GRCC students – none of whom live on campus – to feel a greater part of the school community and get immediate feedback from instructors.

"Wimba Pronto is an exciting tool because it lets students connect in an instant way," says Eric Kunnen, Coordinator of Instructional Technologies. "With Pronto, our students better connect with each other and better with their instructors."



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BETTER CONNECTIONS WITH WIMBA

*"You can see it. They're close.
They know each other well."*

-Jeff Kissinger, Manager of GRCC's Computer Labs, discussing how his students are closer because they use Wimba Pronto

ABOUT WIMBA

Wimba develops web-based collaboration software designed for online education, language learning and live interactive communications. Our collaborative applications enable learning professionals to fully embrace the new wave of teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the Internet; regardless of geographic location, bandwidth or operating system. Our classroom collaboration solutions enable educators to conduct live, online classes, meetings, office hours and other collaborations, and our language learning tools add oral interaction directly into course content, web-pages, study groups and assessments. With simplicity and power, Wimba adds new dimensions to online, accessible education, enhancing the learning experience for both students and instructors.

There is a significant need for GRCC to better create connections among its students and instructors because there is no on-campus housing. Thus, there are fewer opportunities for informal communication and learning among students. By being able to instantly communicate via Pronto, Kunnen believes students and instructors are already better connecting.

"Here at GRCC, we are a commuter campus and students don't spend a great deal of time on campus. One of our missions is build community because we know students communicate via informal learning," Kunnen adds. "We decided that we needed to extend the capabilities of our Blackboard system. We needed to provide students and instructors a better way to connect with each other. Pronto allows classmates to connect to each other very easily. Wimba Pronto is bringing about more community more easily."

Ann Alexander, an Associate Professor in GRCC's School of Business, teaches Business Communications, Organizational Behavior, and Starting A Business. She only teaches one course entirely face-to-face and thus relies on Wimba Pronto to communicate with her online students.

"Wimba Pronto gives my students more opportunities to contact me," Alexander says. "If a student is working on something and has a question and sees me online, she can get to me right away. She can ask me a question, get on with her work, and go on. It's a lot faster than having to wait. It's quicker than email. I'm just right there." In addition to answering student questions, Alexander utilizes Pronto for online office hours and for facilitating group work among her students. "In Business Communications I'll give my students a bad resume and ask them to work in a group to determine what's wrong with the resume. Wimba

is one of main tools they use to work together."

Garry Brand, Director of Distance Learning and a Business Professor, uses Pronto for student interactions in his online course. "If they see me online they know I'm available," he explains. "I also use it to train faculty in a certification course and for teams here one campus. Students love it. They're really good at knowing you're there. They really seem to like the instantaneous connection."

Beyond the student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships fostered via Wimba Pronto, Pronto is also growing in popularity among staff throughout the community college. "Even internally, a lot of staff and faculty are using Pronto to communicate with each other for those instant times when communication is important," Kissinger says. "One of the phrases that's becoming really prevalent here at GRCC is, 'I'll Pronto you.'"

Because Wimba Pronto works exclusively within GRCC's online environment, it ensures that all messages pertain to the school. Kissinger appreciates this aspect of Pronto because it makes all communications "very secure" and very convenient. "Having Pronto set up through Blackboard, I can easily select people who work for me who I can communicate with. I can talk to them from my home or from in the lab. It's a great chat tool. We needed something secure, something inside, we can't have our communications go outside of GRCC." Alexander agrees. "You're not getting spam," she says. "When I get a message on Pronto, I know it's legit."

And in terms of community building, Kissinger knows that Pronto enabled many of his students to know each other better than they would have without it. "You can see it," he says, smiling "They're close. They know each other well."