

Using Chat Rooms to Promote an Online Community

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Twenty-four computers. Twenty-four people sitting at the computers. Twenty-four different rooms. Twenty-four students taking an online class. Are they isolated? Well, yes and no: “yes” in the sense of physical isolation, but “no” in the sense of psychological isolation if the instructor for the course is encouraging online communication among his/her students. It’s not easy to do this—to get strangers talking to one another—but it is possible if enough planning has been given to this communication environment as a way of building a sense of online community. As part of a series of faculty development seminars offered during fall semester, I worked with two other team leaders in researching and synthesizing information about online communication as part of the course requirement. The following is a set of guidelines that I composed for the seminar for successfully implementing chats in an online course. The suggestions are divided into four categories: implementation and management, student motivation and training, assessment of student learning using chat sessions, and evaluation of effectiveness of chat sessions.

Implementation and Management

1. Prepare for the chat by
 - a. Taking a second (or third) look at the directions for the chat to make sure they are clearly stated and will produce the results that you want.
 - b. Having only one major topic per chat session. Keep the students focused.
 - c. Either assigning student groups for chat and giving them class time to agree on a chat time and/or assign times to the four chat rooms so that students can readily access the chat.
 - d. Not scheduling more than three people to a chat if you want everyone to have an opportunity to speak during a 30-minute chat session. If the session is longer, four or five people can participate.
 - e. Giving the students a time limit for a chat session, allowing extra minutes for the socialization that will probably take place at the beginning and ending. Don’t ask the students to chat for more than an hour at a time because they won’t do it anyway.
2. Be flexible in your time range when asking students to complete chat sessions, but have a set beginning date and ending date for completing the chat, preferably within a one-week time span.
3. Encourage people to be on time for the chat so that everyone “hears” everything that is said and no repeats have to be made for latecomers. If there are unpreventable latecomers, be courteous by orienting them as to what has been going on so far in the conversation.
4. Copy and paste their chat log for either your reference or for posting for students who couldn’t attend the chat session. This is particularly important if the group is completing an ongoing group project.
5. If the instructor is a participant in the chat session, he/she might want to design a system equivalent to “raising your hand” to take turns to talk so that the chat conversation can be a little more controlled and sequential. Also, allow students time at the end of the chat for questions and answers, even at the very end for off the immediate topic questions. (Others disinterested can log off then.)
6. Give the students the topic before the scheduled day of the chat. This could be giving them assigned readings, topics for discussion, questions to answer, problems to solve. These can be given out on the calendar posting for the chat, on the discussion board, or through emails.
7. Tell the students (and instructor should also) to have his/her preparation information at hand when sitting down for the chat so that the participants are ready to begin at the scheduled beginning time.
8. Take roll at the beginning in case you lose your connection.
9. Use chat rooms for meaningful learning experiences: it might be brainstorming before writing a paper, discussing group assignments, comparing answers to questions, reviewing for a test, clarifying difficult concepts in the class material, holding virtual office hours, asking and answering questions, etc.
10. Guest speakers can make an interesting chat if the students are intellectually prepared for the experience.

Student Motivation and Training

1. Make sure all students can access the chat rooms and know how to operate the chat room techniques.

2. Teach students (and the instructor should do this also) to respond by prefacing with a name to whom you are responding to help give the chat sequence more logical continuity. If the comment is to more than one person, reference a bit of the original comment in the response, so as to “pinpoint” the object of the response.
3. Think twice about how much it counts as a grade because other commitments might legitimately prevent some students from participating, and this doesn’t seem fair.
4. Do count the participation in some way as part of their grade, or they aren’t as motivated to participate.
5. Teach students (and instructor should do this also) to break up long responses into shorter entries. In other words, hit “enter” after a couple of lines and then keep typing the same sentence or paragraph. This helps the readers grasp the thoughts as they come to the writer and also prevents others from jumping into the conversation and causing a loss in continuity.
6. Teach students to prepare questions and comments in a Word file that they can then copy and paste into the conversation at appropriate times. This is particularly useful if a problem/scenario has been solved/considered before the chat ever begins and everyone is supposed to contribute a response before the discussion begins.
7. Teach the students chat etiquette.

Assessment of Student Learning Using Chat Sessions

1. Remember that some students cannot type as fast as others, so their comments are going to be disjointed. Also related to typing speed is the realization that the “loudest” students are not always the best participants. Sometimes, people “speak” for power.
2. Chats are good places for one-on-one “oral” quizzes. This can be time-consuming probably no more so than person-to-person oral quizzes.
3. If it doesn’t count a whole lot, the chat could be used as a quiz for the three or four participants in the chat session. Their responses give a pretty good idea of how well they understand the material or if they have given critical thought to the previously read scenario and reached any conclusions.
4. Use a chat session as a “debriefing” exercise, asking questions about the assignment if you suspect plagiarism.
5. Having weekly critiques of students’ performance in the field could be conveniently held in a chat room. Have set times for each student from the beginning of the semester so that they know when to log on for their individual sessions with the instructor.
6. Participate in some chat sessions (not all because you don’t have the time if there are too many) so that you can monitor a chat that you want to assess for quality of interactions. (This can also be assessed by the instructor reading the chat logs.)
7. To assess a series of chats, students could take turns summarizing the most important lessons learned in each chat session and submitting them to the others and/or to the instructor. The instructor can randomly validate these summary submissions against the actual chat logs.
8. During a chat time in which the whole class participates, three or four members could carry on a “panel discussion” while the rest of the class “lurks.” Or the group could make “presentations” to the rest of the class. (This could also lead to an in-class discussion based on the online presentation.)
9. At the end of the semester, students could reflect on how he/she has benefited from participation in the chat sessions during the semester. Students could also evaluate other chat participants if they have had several chat sessions together. If this is done, a set of agreed upon criteria available at the beginning the sessions might be the fairest way to do peer evaluations.
10. Chat sessions could be explicit sources of exam questions.
11. Chat sessions could be spin-offs for extended research projects. If desired, the instructor could require students to use issues/questions/etc. that are raised in chat sessions as a basis for further research and reporting.

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Chat Sessions

1. Have clear goals and objectives for the chat sessions. Evaluate effectiveness of the chats based on these goals and objectives. Know clearly the results you want.

2. Design written criteria for an effective chat before the chat sessions begin. Use criteria measures that won't produce ambiguous responses.
3. Be alert, however, for unintended consequences, both positive and negative, as a result of a chat session. Be alert to evaluation criteria that might emerge during a chat session, ways of evaluating the session or the student participation that you hadn't thought of before.
4. If the purpose of the chat session is to save class time for other instructional activities, evaluate if the chat activity was best served by being conducted online or if it should truly have taken place in the class setting.
5. Giving opportunity for students to take more responsibility for their own learning or for intellectual exploration and creativity (when instructor not present) are both legitimate uses of chat sessions.
6. Allow students to respond to chat sessions with opinions about both their social and task satisfaction after having participated in the chat experience.
7. Remember, don't do a chat just to be doing a chat. It's a waste of everyone's time and energy.

If the course is a web-enhanced course, utilizing online technology but not relying on it, these suggestions will also work in that environment. The important concept to realize is that good chats don't just happen. They are planned events, and it's up to the instructor to create an interactive, meaningful, and pleasant learning environment that encourages the students to participate actively in the class.

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