Using Synchronous Chat For International Distance Learning Induction

University of Birmingham

Programme of Study: International MScs in DL

Modules: Induction

Discipline: International Development

Start Date: September 2005

Students: between 5 and 35 students for each induction

Type: Distance

Technology: Chat room tool on WebCT

Approach: eLearning,

Duration of Activity: During the two week online induction

Indicative Moderation / Facilitation Hours: tutor online with students several times per day

Assessment Link: No assessment for this module.

Rationale

Students are encouraged to use the chat room facility on WebCT during their induction exercises in order to point out to them the advantages and disadvantages of using synchronous chat with students who are so geographically spread.

Practice

Students can self-book time in the chat rooms on WebCT to assist them with problem solving during any of the online activities.

E-Learning Advantage

Synchronous chat (either between students or student to tutor) can be a faster and easier way to communicate than waiting for responses via the discussion boards.

Key Points for Effective Practice and Barriers

You need to decide when creating a Chat Room what parameters will work best with your learning design and student cohort.

Chat rooms may be effective for people who are based in the (relatively) same time zones but they can be difficult for people who are in vastly different time zones, or only available at certain times of the day.

Synchronous chat only really works for small groups of people (say, 5 or less). The chat scrolls up (looking like a play script) but is really dependent on typing speed. If participants have mixed ability, the slow ones may become frustrated as their response is to a statement / question further up the 'script'.

Students with English as a second language might also take longer to respond if they have to read and digest what is being said before they can begin typing.

If a member of the chat room group is experiencing technical difficulties and unable to log on, then other members may be waiting for them and that can cause frustration.

Making available Chat features such as **Private Chat Messages** and maintaining a **Chat Log** can enhance the student experience and assist the management thereof.

Conclusion

Synchronous chat can work effectively between people in the same time zone (preferably not somewhere subject to power cuts etc.) but, if the group is only a small one, Skype or some other form of conferencing might be more effective.

Showcase: Synchronous Chat

Two-week online induction modules run for the different intakes of the DL programmes each year. During the modules, the students engage in various activities which involve them working together in groups.

Although there is no activity which is specifically centred on use of the Chat facility in WebCT, they are encouraged to try it out during the icebreaker activity on day two.

There are two ice-breaker activities: one a quiz for use with small groups of students – and the other a project competition for larger groups. They only have two days to complete each of these. (There is a lot to cram in to the two weeks, and so activities do have to run to tight schedules.)

Because they only have the two days and they are usually in varying time zones, they are urged to try the chat rooms. They are told that they have to agree a time when the majority of the group are available, and then 'enter the room' at that time.

Providing them with the opportunity to try out this tool makes them aware of the difficulties of trying to use synchronous chat with an international grouping such as theirs and what they need to be aware of.

It emphasises the fact that they are in different time zones and the difficulties this can represent on the discussion boards when they engage in asynchronous messaging; as well the problems sometimes faced when undertaking a very short group activity with such widely dispersed participants.

For More Information

Hinton, D. (2010) Using Synchronous Chat for Learning Fact Sheet, University of Birmingham.

Aldis, B (2008) Synchronous Meetings: A Way to put Personality in an Online Class, Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE, 9(4) [Online] http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/tojde32/notes_for_editor/notes_for_editor_2.htm [Accessed 13 June 2011].

Programme of Study: Distance

Module: Inductions (DL)

Discipline: International Development

Start Date for use of learning diaries: 2005

Students: around 5 – 35 per module

Type: Distance

Technology: WebCT

Approach: Group work

Learning environment: Chat room facility on WebCT

Design Team: Linda Curry (e-learning manager)

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Technology for Instruction Case Study