



University of Birmingham

Most synchronous (real-time) online discussions are text-based chat. All participants must logon to the Chat Room at the same time and the text-based conversation takes place in real time.

When entering into a text based chat environment we lose the non-verbal cues that assist us in making sense of communication:

(1) visual cues

(facial expressions, posture, gestures, gaze, gender, class, age & ethnicity), auditory cues (voice volume, inflection & tone)

(2) olfactory cues

(perfume, cologne & body odour)

which help us process communication. A useful analogy would be to compare how the visually and hearing impaired compensate when communicating.

Enhancing Learning

Chat can potentially be used to enhance the experience and quality of an online or blended course. These few examples are designed to spark ideas and should be combined with the protocols and strategies examined earlier. Transcripts of chat sessions (where appropriate) should be made available to those participating, either through email, print or bulletin boards.

- Work Group Projects / Brainstorming / EBL
- Socialisation
- Review and Exam Preparation
- Quizzes / questions and answers
- Guest speakers
- Virtual office hours
- Progress review tutorials
- Role play
- Supporting language skills development
- Supporting those with special needs
- Learning support
- Talk to a Librarian

Murphy and Collins (1997) collected data on communication conventions from a synchronous and asynchronous communication as well as pre-course surveys. The following 10 conventions can be used to assist tutors and students in coming to a common understanding:

- Shared meaning
- Keywords
- Shorthand / TXT speak
- Social presence
- Playfulness and humour
- Non-verbal cues in text
- Questions
- Status and directions to others
- Continuation through ellipses
- Emoting and smilies :o)

Opportunities & Challenges

Chat can be a fast-paced and often confusing communication medium. Some opportunities and challenges of this medium include:

- The lack of visual cues (not being able to see others in the group) may in turn block usual prejudices (based on physical social cues) and cultural inhibitions.
- Absence of social context cues (physical environment, auditory and non-verbal behaviour).
- Disruption to turn taking can mean that shy and more reflective are less inhibited (less "barrier" social cues and tutor domination).
- Learners are afforded more processing time while reading and typing messages, whilst still retaining the "feel" of live interaction which is gained when speaking face-to-face.
- Lines of communication often confusingly move out of sync. While you're typing your response, other students may already have moved on to other topics.
- Typed text can be easily saved for sharing, reviewing and reflection where as face-to-face discussion can often be "lost".
- Provide reinforcement, immediate feedback and discussion opportunities for students.
- Providing the opportunity for real-time social interaction.
- Flexibility with scheduling classes.
- Ultimate convenience, when and where you choose.
- Instructors are more accessible.
- Personal consultation and discussion between tutor-student and student-student allowing for instant clarification.

Give Me an Example

Some of the following ground rules specifically relate to the WebCT Chat software. It is advisable to provide a link to these guidelines from the Chat Room entry screen.

- Keep your posts short - the same as in a spoken conversation, to allow the dialogue to flow back and forth between you and others.
- Be as clear and concise as possible.
- If arriving late, wait for at least 5 posts to determine the topic being discussed before posting yourself.
- Decide what tone the conversation has taken before posting.
- Do not type in capital letters - it is considered to be shouting.
- If you feel you have been misunderstood, restate your case.
- Allow enough time for the respondent to read, think, and type before posting the question again.
- Avoid assumptions - ask to have something explained.
- Try to encourage all participants to share their ideas.
- Address each post by name, unless you are speaking to the entire group, so they know you are talking/replying to them.
- Read carefully, and more than once when necessary, to be sure you are reading what the sender has written.
- If you do not want to participate in the ongoing discussion, but want your presence known, state that you are observing. This is polite, especially if you plan to chat once the topic shifts

Protocols and Strategies for Meaningful Synchronous Interaction

Students and tutors need to develop new frames of reference and skills to get the most out of all online communication, especially synchronous chat. Without a range of protocols understood by all participants, instructional sessions can turn into stressful conversational chaos. These strategies can also enable the tutor to dominate the dialogue less, leading to community building.

There are a number of strategies that can be used to ensure meaningful interactions:

1. Ground rules / etiquette
2. What to expect
3. Conventions / e-Body language guide
4. Preparation: seating guide
5. Clear discussion topic
6. Induction Activities, ie retell Cinderella (21st Century)
7. Role taking
8. Group numbers (5-10)
9. Timing
10. Patience

Author: Danielle Hinton

© and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5>

Where Can I Go for More Information?

- Communication Conventions in Instructional Electronic Chats
Murphy, K and Collins, M (1997), <http://disted.tamu.edu/aera97a.htm>
- **Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching**
Palloff, R.M. and Pratt, K. (2001), Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- **Certificate of Online Education and Training Portfolio**
Hinton, D (2003) Institute of Education Unpublished Essay.
- **Your College E-Learning Team**