

Six Experience-based Guidelines for Successful Synchronous Chat

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Introduction

Over the past four years (or a combined eight-years of experience facilitating chat sessions), we have incorporated synchronous chat sessions into our distance learning courses. While doing so, we have diligently elicited and carefully listened to feedback from our students—feedback related to the types of chat activities that our students liked and disliked, including why; how the chat activities met or did not meet students’ learning style needs; and students’ overall perceptions of the effectiveness of the chat sessions in helping them achieve their learning goals, objectives, and outcomes. Based upon the feedback received, as well as our personal observations, we have continually redesigned our chat sessions in an effort to improve students’ chat experiences. In this article, we offer insight into what we have learned from and the accommodations made for our students. From designing purposeful chats to establishing “on-demand” availability, our sincere hope is that these experience-based guidelines help other online instructors who strive, as we do, to design and facilitate highly effective chat experiences for distance learning students.

Guideline One—Design Purposeful Chats

Participation in synchronous chat sessions requires a set time commitment from students who are enrolled in distance classes for the convenience of asynchronous anytime, anywhere learning. Consequently, our students clearly expressed their need for highly structured chat sessions that made efficient use of time. According to students, the ideal framework for their typical 60-minute chat session allowed for a 10-minute “warm-up” period and a 50-minute “work-out” period.

The “warm-up” period, described by Byrne and Waddell (par.13) as a virtual “wine and cheese” time for chat students, permitted a few moments for greetings and informal, social conversations. This opportunity to interact with their peers, as well as with the instructor, was reported to provide a sense of learning community and to encourage participation in the upcoming chat activities.

During the “work-out” period, students expected to

- find clearly defined learning goal, objectives, and outcomes;

- participate in activities and assignments that actively engaged them in the learning process; and
- see clearly how the learning activities and assignments were aligned with the learning goals, objectives, and outcomes.

Following Cennamo and Kalk's mandate to "make sure that each of the activities is linked to one of the learning outcomes, and is not included simply because it seems like a good idea" (101) ensured that students did not view chat assignments as "busy work" or a waste of their valuable time.

Tools, such as activity guidelines, assignment check sheets, scoring rubrics, and graphic organizers, were viewed by students as essential for productive chat work. Students valued collaborative learning activities, including composing lesson plans for peer review, collecting data for shared compilations and analyses, and assembling online resources for discussions that compared/contrasted findings. Other activities valued by students included examining case studies and chatting with a guest speakers (Ko and Rossen 102-132; The Learning Place "In the classroom").

Guideline Two—Allow Students to Determine Days, Times, and Groups for Synchronous Chats

Rather than formally assigning students to synchronous chat days, times, and groups, we facilitate a more student-directed assignment process. We feel this is a welcome compromise for students who have enrolled in an online course because of its asynchronous nature and feel constrained by a synchronous component, such as chat. In addition, research has shown that students demonstrate greater interest, sense of competence, and creativity when the learning environment supports self-determination (Woolfolk-Hoy 361-369).

We provide students with the opportunity to establish their own chat groups through the following three-step process.

1. Students list the days of the week in their order of preference for chat, along with narrative explanations. The preferred days of the week are easy to tally and the narrative explanations provide great insight into our students' lives. (For example, many students report that Mondays are just too hectic, that Wednesdays are traditional church nights, that Fridays are sporting events for their children, and the like.)
2. Based upon the day(s) selected, students provide time slots that work best with their personal schedules—and, in some instances, time zones. Although students tend to prefer evening chats, early morning and lunch-hour chats times are accommodated as well.
3. We create and present a matrix of the chat days, chat times, and "seats" available for students. Then students assign themselves seats on a first-come, first-served basis.

Special Note: We have found that chat groups are most effective with small groups of students rather than large numbers of students. Student feedback suggests that chat groups with four to five members work best.

Guideline Three—Plan for Formative and Summative Evaluations of Chats

Incorporating evaluation into chat enables us to solicit students' comments, criticisms, and suggestions during chat (formative evaluation), as well as measure the effect of chat on students' learning at the conclusion of the course (summative evaluation). Our students have expressed appreciation for the opportunities we provide for feedback after each chat session and at the completion of each online course.

Formative evaluation is used as a tool to improve students' chat experiences as the course progresses. From a simple request for feedback to a formal checklist directly related to the chat assignments, the formative evaluation for each chat session informs us of the students' difficulties encountered; reactions to assignments; completion times; accomplishments in relationship to chat goals, objectives, and learning outcomes; and more. These are all taken into consideration when designing and developing subsequent chat assignments.

Summative evaluation is used as a tool to verify the effectiveness of chat assignments in helping students achieve the course goals, objectives, and learning outcomes. From a component of a larger course evaluation to a comprehensive review of how closely chat aligned with course components (congruence analysis), the summative evaluation provides us with the information we need to make those "go-no-go" decisions related to chat assignments, as conceptualized in *The Systematic Design of Instruction* (Dick, Carey, and Carey 348-372).

Guideline Four—Establish Rules for Chatiquette

Although we find that most students are familiar with netiquette—etiquette practiced in electronic communications, few students new to the chat environment are familiar with chatiquette—etiquette practiced in chat sessions. Therefore, we conscientiously teach, model, and expect students' conformation to the rules of chatiquette.

During the first chat session each term, typically a "Chat Social," students introduce themselves, explore the chat tools, and establish a set of chatiquette rules. These rules may include, but are not limited to, the following that were developed or adopted by chat students from a review of online resources (The Learning Place "Chatiquette: Guidelines for chatting online"; Stewart "Common sense Netiquette rules"), as well as from prior personal experiences:

1. Make sure your computer and Internet connection are sufficient for chat. (Computers and connections that are insufficient may cause a number of problems. These problems will annoy and frustrate both you and your chat session members. Upgrade or logon using a computer and connection which are compatible with whatever chat system you are using.)
2. Announce when you are entering the chat session through a greeting, such as, "Hello!" (Entering without participating is considered lurking.) Also, announce when you are leaving the chat session through a closing remark, such as "Bye for now!"
3. Do not use all capital letters when typing chat messages. (Caps are perceived as shouting.)

4. Do not make comments that could be considered sarcastic. (Remember that people cannot see your facial expressions or body language. All they can “go by” are the words that you type.)
5. Do not flame others during a discussion. (A flame is an insulting remark meant to incite anger.)
6. If you use abbreviations to speed up the conversation, make sure that all chat session participants are familiar with their meanings.
7. If you use emoticons to express yourself, make sure all chat session participants are familiar with their meanings. (Emoticons are keyed characters that indicate emotions, such as sadness :-(or happiness :-).)
8. Come to the chat session prepared to accomplish the learning goals, objectives, and outcomes established. If this means having certain pre-chat assignments ready for chat, be sure they are done well ahead of time. Other chat session members are relying on you!
9. Remain focused during the chat session. If necessary, set boundaries with family members. Help them understand that you are in class when chatting and that you should not be disturbed unless there is an emergency situation at hand.
10. Do not “hog” the chat discussion. Allow for other opinions and promote balanced participation.

Guideline Five—Establish Clear Academic Expectations for Chats

Students, especially graduate students, want to know exactly what is expected of them in an online class. Nothing less. Nothing more. Logically, the syllabus provides the starting point for establishing clear academic expectations for an online course, including the chat component (Ko and Rossen 65-77; Shelton and Saltzman ch.11). However, we found the syllabus written in terms too general to fully address both our students’ “need to know,” as well as our academic expectations for chat. Therefore, we typically composed a separate document that addressed both students’ needs and instructors’ expectations. This document, the Academic Expectations for Chat, was then simply referred to in the syllabus.

Judith L. Johnson, Director of the Office of Instructional Research at the University of Southern Maine, as well as the author of Distance Education: The Complete Guide to Design, Delivery, and Improvements, considers it good practice to communicate high expectations to online students. She states, “Expect more and you will get it. High expectations are important for everyone—for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy” (142).

Therefore, when developing the Academic Expectations for Chat, we included the following:

1. a definition of chat
2. an overview of the chat environment
3. an explanation of the purpose of chat
4. a chat calendar for the entire term
5. the chat attendance expectations and guidelines

6. the chat participation expectations and guidelines
7. the chat preparation expectations and guidelines
8. the chat reporting expectations and guidelines
9. the chat assignment submission expectations and guidelines
10. an explanation of how chat is graded on a group basis
11. an explanation of how chat is graded on an individual basis
12. an explanation of how much chat contributes to the final grade in the class
(in percentage points)

Guidelines Six—Establish Availability for Chats

Four years ago, we both felt we needed to actively participate in chat sessions with our students. Due to the number of chat sessions scheduled each week, we quickly realized that it was physically impossible to do so. Consequently, we redesigned our chat sessions to actively engage students and entirely exclude instructor participation. At that point, we officially deemed ourselves chat facilitators, rather than chat participants.

From then on, we would “drop in” on chat sessions from time to time to greet students, see how they were doing, and answer any questions they had. We discovered that students rarely needed help. Most questions posed related to advising rather than the task at hand. Later, students’ feedback revealed that our presence was more of a disruption to the flow of work in the allocated time than of benefit. So, the “drop in” approach stopped.

Now we simply establish our “on-demand” availability for chat. “On-demand” availability helps ensure that students use their allocated time and energy to accomplish learning tasks rather than to work through confusions that may arise. We always provide students with information related to how we may be reached during scheduled chat days and times.

Conclusion

In the years to come, we and our students will grow as chat facilitators and participants. The experience-based guidelines will grow and change as well. In the meantime, the current guidelines are offered to help instructors who wish to join us in striving to design and facilitate highly effective chat experiences for distance learning students.

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