Chapter X

Synchronous Discussion

imbred: im a he
Bronco: delivrance
LadeezMan: lol
Pashmina: STOP IT
Host_Chris2: it should be “imbred”
imbred: actually it should be “imbored” but I missed out the o
Bronco: oh
Pashmina: r u bored imbored
imbred: yes
connection to server has been terminated ...

(Dowling, 2004)

Introduction

In this chapter, the dynamics of control will be explored, as they apply to an assortment of real-time (or synchronous) communication systems. A particular emphasis of the chapter will be on text-based real-time chat systems such as instant messengers and Internet relay chat (IRC) as such tools are by far the most dominant in current learning environments. It will be suggested that, for many purposes, most real-time text chat systems make a poor tool for learning. This is for a variety of reasons, some technical, some pedagogical, but at least partly due to the limited control over
choice and constraint that they provide. As long as this is recognised, then it is still possible to use them fruitfully in many circumstances and, when combined with other tools, they make powerful educational tools. The chapter will continue with an overview of some other synchronous tools for education such as video and audio conferencing. Such systems will be seen to be of relatively limited use when used on their own, exhibiting many of the same weaknesses as synchronous text chat. However, in combination (particularly through Web meeting systems), they might provide greater ability for learners to choose to choose their learning trajectories than many face-to-face learning environments.

Synchronous Text Chat

There are many synchronous text chat systems available from instant messaging systems (IM) like AIM™, MSN® Messenger, and Google™ Talk, to Internet relay chat (IRC), to MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and MOOs (MUD – object-oriented), to facilities provided by proprietary Web conferencing systems like LiveMeeting™ (www.microsoft.com/office/RTC/livemeeting/default.mspx) and Webex™ (www.webex.com). All allow some form of almost (seldom exactly) real-time communication through typed text. Some provide other communication mechanisms, such as avatars, with more or less fine-grained control over the information conveyed by them. For others, text chat is simply an alternative channel to the main communication medium (typically video conferencing and/or audio chat).

Time Constraints

The most immediately obvious constraints on any synchronous dialogue, whether through text or otherwise, are that:

1. all participants must be present at the same time; and
2. there is a distinct and absolute start and end to the conversation.

This, in turn, affects the nature of the discussion. During the early phases of a synchronous dialogue, some time is typically spent getting acquainted, seeing who is here, dealing with minor technical hitches, and so on. The discussion that occurs is then moulded towards the finish by the knowledge that the end is nigh. A somewhat similar dynamic may occur within an asynchronous discussion, but the desperate intensity of a real time conversation tends to amplify the effect.