Chapter 13
Students’ Experiences in Using Chat Rooms as Virtual Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares experiences from a group of students who were using the chat rooms as part of instruction in their course work. It also attempts to explain the lessons learnt when one exposes the distant learning students to a different method of facilitation. The respondents were 51 university distance learning students from Kenyatta university in Kenya whose lecturer had created chat rooms as virtual classrooms in their coursework during the May to August 2012 semester. The lecturer’s availability at all times was vital to students’ success in using the chat room. Using chat rooms as virtual classrooms gave every student in the class room an equal voice as students engaged the lecturer and each other on a common playing ground. This chapter underscores the importance of chat rooms as environments that supports virtual learning for distance learners and encourages learners’ participation hence enhancing learner-centered learning.

INTRODUCTION

Use of chat rooms in moodle for distance learning allows students to communicate in real time to discuss the topics of the course or assignments given to them by the lecturer. It also allows easier access to the lecturer where the lecturer communicates and clarifies topics of discussion. The lecturer can also carry out his/her class virtually by use of the chat room. Distance learning is any program or course offered in such a way that the instructor and the student are separated by physical distance (Wahlstrom, Williams, & Shea, 2003). It means that the program or course is not offered in the traditional classroom. This varies from online courses, telecommuting courses and video courses. Where the courses are offered

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online, the students at times access their classes from institutional centers where there is free Internet connection since not all students have Internet at home. Making use of Internet resources for distance learning can provide a great advantage to the students and lecturers. Nevertheless, steps must be put in place to make sure that use of Internet resources is done in the most effective way possible. Therefore, the use of chat room in distance learning has become an important tool for online learning.

Use of chat room in learning brings about collaboration among students of different backgrounds. This enhances social component of any course and enable learners to access multiple perspectives of the subject matter (Jonassen, 1997). There are a number of reported benefits for learners in using synchronous communication like chat rooms in learning such as increased participation; increased motivation; increased learner control; and opportunities for skills development (Mynard, 2004).

In an environment where collaborative tools such as chat rooms are in use, online classes cease to be like a medium and they become like a learning platform. At the same time, the online learning software ceases to be a content-consumption tool and becomes more like a content authoring tool where learning is created (Downes, 2005). This means that students have their own personal place and virtual space to create and discuss their work. Moreover, students produce the content by collecting, organizing, interpreting and reflecting on documents and other sources of information. This approach to learning means that content is created and distributed in different ways. Instead of the content being composed, organized and packaged, it is now syndicated, aggregated by students, remixed and repurposed with student’s individual applications to produce final product stored for another student’s reading and use. The chat room gives a student the chance to collaborate online with other students and this promotes interactivity, student-centered learning and peer input.

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of students in using the Chat-rooms as virtual classrooms for distance learners. The study sought to;

1. Find out the students’ experiences in enhancing student-centered learning using the chat-rooms as virtual classrooms for distance learners.
2. Lessons learnt in the use of chat rooms as virtual classrooms for distance learners.

Learner Centered Learning in Distance Education

The learner-centered approach focuses on designing instruction that is sensitive to the individual student’s needs, abilities, and interests rather than rigidly tied to the subject matter (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Learner-centered learning has been defined most simply as an approach to learning in which learners choose not only what to study but also how and why that topic might be of interest (Rogers, 1983). This means that the learning environment has learner responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to the emphasis on instructor control and the coverage of academic content that is common in much conventional, didactic teaching (Cannon, 2000). Additionally, learners find the learning process more meaningful when topics are relevant to their lives, needs, and interests, and when they are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Generally, in a learner-centered environment, learners are the active participants in their own learning. They make decisions about what and how they will learn, construct new knowledge and skills by building on current knowledge and skills. They understand expectations and are encouraged to use self-assessment measures. They also monitor their own learning to develop strategies for learning and work in collaboration