Chapter XVII

Learning through Chat: University of the Arts London Case Studies in Online Learning in Art, Design and Communication

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Abstract

Synchronous computer conferencing, or “chat,” is an effective and versatile tool of online learning, providing users with opportunities for real-time communication. Chat can be used for a variety of educational purposes, including academic seminars, student tutorials, recruitment interviews, and student presentations. In this chapter, we argue that through practice, in a socially open learning environment, chat is a focused learning activity, providing a forum where identities emerge and activity is at its greatest. We demonstrate the diverse and growing uses of chat through reference to examples from the chat archives of online distance courses at the University of the Arts London. We contextualise chat within a social learning framework and provide an analytical framework drawn from conversational analysis in order to examine the issues associated with chat in practice and how practice is improved through specific methodologies, new protocols, and inventive application.

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Introduction

This chapter aims to examine, analyse, and evaluate the use and practice of synchronous computer-mediated conferencing (SCMC), or “chat,” through reference to online courses running at the University of the Arts London (UAL). UAL offers a variety of courses under its specialism in art, design, and communication.

The application of chat, particularly in online distance learning, stems from its value in helping build online communities, imparting a sense of a social learning space to an online course, and engendering a feeling of immediacy in peer and tutor interactions.

Our conception of teaching is of practices that support and promote learning through peer-to-peer interactions and through activities that are socially important (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). In an online environment, chat systems are one of the most important online tools responsible for achieving high levels of social interaction.

The technical simplicity of chat environments imparts flexibility, promoting its use for a range of learning and teaching purposes. According to the intended objectives for a chat session, different protocols of use may apply and different techniques or modes of chat may need to be developed. For example, we have employed chat for free-flowing discussions, highly structured student presentations, tutorials, and candidate interviews. Each re-purposing of the technology has led us to develop appropriate learning and teaching practices.

Chat provides regular opportunities for live meetings in the virtual learning environment, (VLE) and regular meetings keep students motivated. In this respect, chat is an important component in building an online learning community. It is inclusive and democratic, allowing all participants to contribute as meaningful social actors in the learning space.

Chat as a social technology of communication is usefully construed within the framework of conversational analysis (CA). CA illuminates the processes and structures of conversation and is capable of providing insights into behaviour in the chat room. By understanding something of normal conversational structures, we begin to understand some of the problems associated with using chat.

Whilst chat systems are technologically simple, they are extremely flexible and adaptable in use. Their flexibility allows all participants in a session to contribute equally in shaping the forms of communication as well as the content. As participants become more confident, they are able to help determine the manner and use of chat sessions. In this way, chat practice continues to grow, incorporating an expanding range of valuable uses.

The Place of Chat in Building an Online Learning Community

In order to build a successful online social space, the VLE must be perceived by all participants as an active and busy place (Garrison, 1995). Leaving a course inactive for any length of time will certainly demotivate students.
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