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Synchronous Discussion in Online Courses: A Pedagogical Strategy for Taming the Chat Beast

by *Craig W. Smith*

I have always hated Internet chat rooms and studiously avoided them. To me, they are chaotic, confusing, and frustrating. I have also accepted the fact that on this question I am probably in the minority. I suspect that most students who participate in online courses have experience with chat and are quite comfortable with the fragmented and seemingly incoherent conversations that are the hallmark of Internet chat rooms, but I am not comfortable with the chaos. As I began developing courses for online delivery, I therefore dreaded the possibility that I might have to include chat as a synchronous communication tool.

However, I eventually realized that only using asynchronous discussion boards and e-mail would not adequately address the subject matter. The course I was teaching was a graduate course on theories of psychotherapy and family therapy, and much of the material was amenable to the asynchronous methods of threaded discussions and e-mails. Yet I worried that the lack of spontaneous real-time interaction among course participants would fail to integrate the course material knowledge with the professional role of therapist I sought to foster in my students. The immediacy of chat can be a significant factor in building online community (Cox, Carr, and Hall 2004; Ko and Rossen 2004; Ruhleder 2004; Schwier and Balbar 2002; *Online Classroom* 2005). Short of high bandwidth audio/video conferencing, it is as close an approximation to face-to-face interaction as you will get in an online course (Pan and Sullivan 2005; Barnes [2003](#)). This seemed to be particularly the case in my graduate courses where the give-and-take of open discussion in a seminar format was the typical approach to learning. Consequently, I decided to include a virtual class time in the course.

These chat sessions, however, were initially less than satisfying for everyone because of the typical pattern of multiple conversations occurring simultaneously. The sense of community and connectedness was overshadowed by frustration. I wanted to have the opportunity to interact with the students in a more spontaneous manner while still retaining some semblance of order that would replicate a seminar-type environment. To make the course more manageable (and for me, bearable), I therefore devised a protocol for virtual classroom etiquette—or "chatiquette"—based on research on classroom discourse (West and Pearson 1994) and conversational turn-taking (Schegloff 2000). While this protocol does reduce the free-flowing interaction characteristic of most chat sessions, it does not constrain the interaction to the extent that often occurs with a designated moderator controlling the chat session (Motteram [2001](#)); instead, it allows all participants to monitor themselves and others in contributing to the discussion. In what follows, I first outline the practical issues of classroom etiquette and synchronous communication that this protocol seeks to address, and I then illustrate the protocol and discuss its usefulness for online instructors.

Online Class Etiquette

Classroom etiquette, in either a graduate seminar or an undergraduate class, directs the progression of discourse. In the classroom, just as in all face-to-face interaction (Duncan 1972; Duncan and Niederehe 1974; Schegloff 2000), nonverbal cues guide and punctuate such things as gaining and relinquishing the floor, emphasizing statements, digressing from the subject, and changing the topic of conversation. Whether in a lecture or a seminar, students acknowledge the instructor as the moderator of the discussion and rely on the instructor to provide structure and to manage the discussion (West and Pearson 1994). In smaller groups and seminars, the instructor may relinquish some of this control in order to facilitate a more open discussion although in these cases students must accept the burden of making sure that the discussions are meaningful and productive.

The socialized conventions that structure and organize face-to-face conversation are lacking in the online environment of synchronous communication. Without the nonverbal and verbal cues that indicate a request for the floor (i.e., a raised hand, a cleared throat), synchronous discussions can become disjointed. The lack of coherence is due to the unavoidable delay required in entering comments and the consequent blending of entries that occurs when three or more individuals are, in a sense, speaking over one another. In an informal chat, this dynamic may be irritating. In a learning context in which the exchange of complicated or sophisticated concepts and principles is being attempted, a lack of coherence and flow can quickly degrade into worthless chatter or confusion (Pimentel, Fuks, and Lucena [2003](#), [2005](#)).

A Facilitated Approach to Synchronous Communication

Course management systems (CMSs) such as [Blackboard](#) continue to develop increasingly sophisticated tools that provide greater control over chat sessions. However, these controls require the instructor to grant or deny access repeatedly for each individual as each signals the desire to participate, so that the instructor typically has to spend much of his or her time acting as traffic cop rather than fully participating in the discussion. This moderated approach may be very effective when the intention is to have a very formalized and structured interaction—for example, a lecture session in which student responses are allowed for the purposes of clarifying information. However, the use of such CMS moderation tools in a less formal, seminar-type interaction may become burdensome and stifling to the discussion.

The other end of the continuum is an unmoderated approach that allows all participants to be active users and to comment freely at any time. This approach is customarily recognized as chat. Several discussion threads may be occurring simultaneously, and participants must pick one thread to follow, try to follow all of them, or follow none of them. The best real world example of this approach would be conversations that occur at a party—a participant can wander in and out of a number of ongoing conversations and the experience can be lively and invigorating. Yet in a synchronous chat session, this unmoderated approach can be inefficient and frustrating if the intent of the session is to interact around a specific topic and allow all parties to contribute to the discussion. In an unmoderated chat students must decide to prioritize a single voice (or perhaps two) and follow it; in an ideal learning environment, however, all voices would be heard, and none would be disposable, spoken over, or shouted down.

The following protocol offers a bridge between the free-for-all approach of unstructured chat and the constrained interaction that may occur with CMS virtual classroom tools. The protocol allows all members to participate in the exchange without the need for one member (the instructor) to assume control of the interaction. Nor does it require additional equipment or expense for students that the use of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and video conferencing technologies entail (Pan and Sullivan [2005](#)). It should be noted that the use of this protocol is not always advisable. An informal chat between two to four participants may dispense with the protocol and still engage in an effective conversation, particularly when the activity is centered on community building (Ko and Rossen 2004). However, in debates, in-depth discussions, or conversations with more than four participants, the use of the protocol can afford a more coherent, respectful, and thoughtful discourse.

Virtual Class Chatiquette

Virtual Class Chatiquette is a way of fostering the courtesy and respect expected in a group conversation. The purpose is not to stultify the conversation; rather it is to facilitate clear and unambiguous communication in the learning environment. It is a way to make apparent to all participants the usual nonverbal cues used in turn-taking and in giving and relinquishing the discussion floor. Once the students become familiar with the protocol, all of the participants become self-monitoring. Consequently, the instructor is able to devote more time to interacting in the dialogue and less time monitoring the session. Naturally, participants are still free to use the communicative devices that have emerged in instant messaging such as emoticons (:-), :-(), etc.) and acronyms (BTW-by the way, IMHO-in my humble opinion, etc.) to further convey the nonverbal cues lost in synchronous communication.

Virtual Class Chatiquette provides overt signals that represent the signals used in conversation in a classroom. If a participant wants to participate in the discussion, he or she can "raise a hand" by entering an exclamation point or a question mark to signal his/her desire to comment or ask a question related to the current topic. If a participant wants to change topics or ask a question on a different topic, he or she can enter "new !" or "new ?". Everyone can observe the sequence of participation and respond accordingly. Turn-taking signals can be entered at any time just as a raised hand might occur in a classroom, and the participants can monitor the order of requests.

A particularly important guideline is to have participants enter their comments in clauses, phrases, or sentence fragments rather than the comments in their entirety. Moreover, when participants' comments are complete and they wish to relinquish the floor, they should indicate that they have completed their comments with forward slashes at the end of their comment. For example:

John: When you are attempting to establish
John: a therapeutic relationship
John: it is important to use
John: nonverbal signals that convey empathy and support.///

In doing so, all of the participants can follow the train of thought as it unfolds, rather than having to wait for the entire comment to be presented and then having to take the time to consider and respond. This significantly increases the amount of communication that can take place and produces a smoother process of interaction. In turn, the terminal slashes at the end of a comment provide a clear cue for when someone else who has requested the floor can proceed. If someone misses the request and interrupts out of turn, the instructor or any other participant can correct the mistake. In fact, I have found that the participants become very adept at monitoring turns and correcting inadvertent interruptions. An example of a chat session between myself and my faculty colleagues illustrates the use of these conventions ([Exhibit 1](#)).

I have found that the principles of Virtual Class Chatiquette have greatly enhanced the use of synchronous communication in my courses. Once students overcome the initial awkwardness of learning the protocol, the conversation in the virtual classroom becomes much more effective and productive. As the members discuss assigned readings, everyone attends to the speaker's comments and responds to the current topic. When the topic changes, the students can easily see and follow the new topic. The difference in interaction is comparable to the flow of discussion during a seminar versus the chat that takes place prior to the beginning of a seminar.

A particularly salient example of the utility of this facilitated approach would be chat sessions involving guest lecturers. Guest lecturers for my course have participated in online sessions from their homes or offices throughout the world, thereby giving my class members the opportunity to interact directly with the scholars whose works they are studying. Prior to the guest lecture, I e-mail lecturers a copy of the chatiquette guidelines and correspond with them by telephone and e-mail and, if possible, engage them in a short session if they have not used chat before. Meanwhile, the students have prepared themselves with relevant readings and discussions (including asynchronous discussion) prior to the guest lecture. Those guests who have been involved in previous chat experiences have remarked that the chatiquette guidelines made the experience much more effective and enjoyable. They reported feeling less overwhelmed by multiple conversational streams and felt that the conversation was smoother and more coherent.

Students have reported through course evaluations that while virtual class sessions are still the least desirable aspect of online learning, they found them much more useful when using the chatiquette conventions. As one student noted, "It went very well once we got the pattern down." At the same time, another student observed, "It was effective and informative, if it must be used, but I prefer [the] 'live' classroom over it. Humor, flow, pace, spontaneous interaction, and personality are often lost in the virtual

world." The latter comment was from a student during a semester when both virtual class sessions and on-site class sessions were held and reflects an incontrovertible fact: Resident students still expect face time with their professors. Until the day when all online and hybrid courses are accessed through broadband audio/video technologies and the difference between virtual and face-to-face is blurred to indistinction, virtual class chatiquette may be a helpful tool for bridging the gap between rigidly moderated virtual lectures and spontaneous and unstructured chats.

Principles of Virtual Class Chatiquette

The following guidelines are provided to the students as part of the course syllabus. While some of these guidelines might not be necessary for all graduate students, particularly those who have prior experience with chat in online or hybrid courses, they are meant to be easily adopted by instructors and students at various levels of education.

- 1.) At the beginning of each online chat session, the instructor will clear any pre-discussion messages and make an introductory statement. Participants should wait until discussion is invited before interjecting comments.
- 2.) If a participant has a comment or question, he/she should type "!" for a comment or "?" for a question.
- 3.) A participant should not type all of his/her comment before entering it. He/she should type a clause, phrase, or sentence fragment at a time and then press enter, so that the group does not have to look at white space while typing occurs. This allows the idea to unfold before the group. For example:

John: When you are attempting to establish
John: a therapeutic relationship
John: it is important to use
John: nonverbal signals that convey empathy and support.///

- 4.) When the complete idea is entered, three forward slash marks (///) will indicate to the group that the next participant may begin (e.g., ". . . therefore, we must conclude that Freud was hopelessly insane.///").
- 5.) Those wishing to comment may ask for the floor by typing "?" or "!" at any time. The first person to enter a "?" or "!" will have the floor to make his/her contribution. In this way the instructor will not have to call on the next participant. Everyone will be responsible for maintaining the flow of conversation. (Alternatively, the principle may be that those wishing to comment may request the floor by typing "?" or "!" at any time. The instructor will then call on the first person who entered a request.)
- 6.) If a participant wishes to change the topic of conversation, this is signaled by typing "new ?" or "new !". If no one objects by typing "!" or "?" and proceeding with the present topic (in other words, if there is silence), then the participant may proceed with the new topic.
- 7.) The fact that the discussion is not taking place in each other's presence does not excuse rude behavior. There will be no flaming (i.e., personal attacks or crude language in class discussion). Separate, private chats during the discussion are the equivalent of passing notes and are also unacceptable. Participants are encouraged to challenge other participants' comments in a manner that enhances critical thinking and analysis of the course material.
- 8.) Online chats conducted independently by class members are not subject to these guidelines. However,

participants are encouraged to be polite and respectful in all milieus connected with this course.

It is advisable to have a practice session or allow a few minutes at the beginning of the course's first virtual class to allow the members to become familiar with these guidelines.

Conclusion

Online instructors, particularly those who have recently begun to incorporate online components in their teaching, have good reason to feel concerned about the potential for chat sessions to become less than productive in their courses. However, the protocol of Virtual Class Chatiquette may serve as a helpful tool for such instructors as they seek to tame the chat beast in their online courses while still ensuring that synchronous communication maintains the immediacy and vitality that is often lacking in asynchronous communication. Although I am still chat room avoidant, these guidelines helped me to overcome my fears and utilize such technology more effectively and productively in my own teaching.

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