

Strategies for Using Chat

Well-managed and focused synchronous chat sessions can provide powerful online learning experiences and add a dynamic dimension to online courses. When used appropriately, chat sessions can provide opportunities for high quality and in-depth discussions and enhance student learning. To make chats successful, they should be used for well-planned instructional activities.

Design Your Chat

- **Review Course Content**

Instructors can use chat sessions to help students review course content and answer students' questions during semester or schedule the chat before midterm or final exam to help student review core content and answer students' specific questions.

- **Virtual Office Hours**

Set weekly times when you are available online so your students can contact you about the class. This can be done by appointment as well.

- **Brainstorming Sessions**

Use chat to start brainstorming for writing assignments such as a term paper. This can also function as a pre-writing phase for students to come up with ideas for their paper.

- **Small Group Project Work**

Break your class into small groups of 3-5 students and have them schedule chat sessions to work together on a project. They can meet online at the onset of the project to discuss the assignment, determine a strategy for working together, divide up the work, and brainstorm ideas.

- **Guest Speakers**

Invite a guest to your course chat session (an outside expert in the field) and ask your students to be prepared to ask the guest questions. This activity provides your students with information about real world experiences.

- **Oral Quizzes**

Have your students meet with you individually online and quiz them on course content. You can assess how well they know the material in just a few minutes of questions and answers. Using chat you can explore depth as well as breadth of your students' knowledge and understanding of the concepts. Since your students sign up for the date and time of their own quizzes (you can provide an

online sign up sheet), you are giving them some control and responsibility for their learning experience. This supports a very student-centered approach to teaching.

Chat Management Techniques

- **Be Prepared**

Good preparation and structure is critical to the success of your chat session. Some instructors use pre-typed questions or short comments that they can cut and paste into the chat program from their word processor.

- **Limit the Number of Participants**

Generally speaking, 12-15 members in a chat room are manageable by an instructor. Too many students in a chat room are hard to control.

- **Post Questions in Advance**

You can post questions to be discussed in the chat in advance. Thus, students can think about questions ahead of time and they can have something to "say" in the chat.

- **Chat Logs Can Be a Study Tool**

After each chat session, post the transcript on the course site so your students can reread the conversation that took place during the chat. This offers your students an opportunity to review the discussion and gives those who were not present a chance to know what took place.

- **Have Definite Starting and Ending Times**

Advertise your chat sessions well in advance so your students have time to arrange their schedules to be able to attend. This will also give them time to prepare for the discussion and think of questions they would like to ask. Limit each chat session to 30-45 minutes and cut it off when time is up. Chatting is a highly intensive activity. It is difficult to stay focused for a long period.

- **Limit Topic of Conversation**

Limit the chat session to no more than two specific topics. This will help structure the discussion and make chat session stay focused.

Chat Techniques

- According to research, student-initiated and instructor-facilitated chat works better than instructor-led chat. In the chat room, the role of instructor is more like

- a facilitator. The instructor will challenge students to think and construct their own knowledge structure.
- Ask for clarification if you do not understand something posted by someone else. The instructor can ask: "what do you mean by saying..."
 - To help build discussions, instructors can say "Think about words of Student A, do others have any comment on this?"
 - The instructor can keep the chat on track by saying "These are questions for today's topic..."
 - The instructor can send private message to students who are a little off track by saying "Please hold your questions a little bit, we will talk about this later."
 - The instructor should scaffold chat discussion. He/she can encourage students and challenge them by saying "we are on the right track. Let's think about this more..."
 - Upon entering the chat session, greet everyone and announce yourself.
 - Address individual people you are responding to by name so they know you are talking to them.
 - Break lengthy messages into short segments, each ending with "more..." then others in chat will wait for you.
 - Be as clear and concise as possible.
 - Say goodbye when you are ready to log off. Your last message should end with an indication such as "Last Post."

Reference:

Lieberman & Stovall (1999). Strategies for Using Chat as a Communication Tool. Internet Resource.