How to Conduct a Course-Based Computer Chat Room: Enabling a Space for Active Learning

Certain strategies can enable successful chat rooms in academic courses.

by Christyne A. Berzsenyi

Introduction

Determining how much authority teachers of writing ought to share with students in computer-assisted classrooms is a pedagogical decision with personal, rhetorical, political, and ethical implications. Scholars such as Porter, Sullivan, Howard, Takayoshi, Turkle, and others have noted that computer-assisted writing instruction presents challenges regarding how teachers “should” and “could” mediate communication with students. In particular, chat rooms, which are real-time written message exchanges in computer cyberspaces, are highly interactive, student-centered learning contexts. Instructing students on computer use, dealing with their communication anxieties, addressing inflammatory language use, and reducing frustration are some of the tasks teachers must perform while conducting course-based chat rooms.

Despite these obstacles, many good reasons exist for incorporating chat rooms into composition instruction. First of all, writing instruction must now accommodate electronic discourses and media because of the ever-increasing use of technology. Students need to be proficient at e-mail, Web and database research, computer software presentations, and electronic chat rooms and discussion boards. Second, computer chat rooms immerse students in the act of writing to real audiences, raising their awareness of audience issues as they exchange messages. Third, chat rooms allow teachers to engage the greatest number of students in discussion at the same time. If students are not getting involved in conversation, the medium is not being used to its full potential (Hawisher). Fourth, computer chat is an effective way to involve students in collaborative work. For example, students can chat to form groups around common interests, exchange ideas for developing collaborative projects, and share course information. Fifth, chat room exchanges easily enable the teacher to challenge students to a deeper understanding of their responses by asking students to elaborate on a previous message.

Finally, computer chat rooms are well suited for developing spaces for cooperative learning. For example, students can exchange responses to course readings, share strategies for a writing assignment, and discuss other course components. More specifically, I ask basic writing students to read an essay and then post a message in the chat room to this question, “What is the thesis, purpose, and audience of this short essay?” One student wrote, “The audience of this piece would probably be disabled veterans and
paraplegic people. The purpose and thesis would be to inform people of virtual reality and how it is enhancing the future.” This assignment requires all students to present their analyses and allows each student to read the others’ responses to the same material, enabling the students to learn from each other. Further, such an exchange encourages a conversation of multiple viewpoints in an atmosphere of cooperative learning, shifting some of the responsibility of teaching from the instructor to the students.

By examining some of my own pedagogical trials, errors, and successes with chat rooms, I here offer some strategies for conducting effective participation among students in such settings. I also discuss several models of teacher-student interaction for developing the instructor’s role in academic chat rooms.

**Enabling Students to Conference**

It is important for students to know that academic chat rooms are not for entertainment, as many Internet chat rooms are. Rather, teachers must demonstrate that chat is a valuable writing tool for learning and communication. Accordingly, the benefits and drawbacks of communicating with chat should be discussed with students before they actually start their dialogue. For example, I have found it is effective to ask students to compare oral communication with chat room discussion and print writing in terms of the length of messages, opportunities for interaction, the lack of physical presence, and so forth have been effective. In doing so, teachers enable more productive use of the chat room and prevent apathetic or overly playful attitudes of unsuccessful conferencing.

To begin computer conferences, teachers need to introduce students to the constraints and the features of the software such as message length, message retrieval, and message reply functions. Once students have some initial instruction, they need the opportunity to practice messaging casually. For example, I once asked students in a basic writing class to discuss what they did over the weekend that included a Friday the college was closed due to bad weather. One student replied by saying, “my house got washed away this weekend.” This message sparked other students to discuss the effects of the storm on their property, their work schedules, and their lives. Here are two representative responses: “I had to drive all these weird detours to get home,” and “I drove all the way to school and it was closed.” Within this casual conversation, students experimented with the new communication tool to get a feel for how one exchanges messages. Such an icebreaker session assures that students develop literacy in chat rooms before they engage in more task-oriented conferences. This “getting acquainted” session enables success in subsequent messaging.

While some students will be experienced with computer chat rooms, others are unfamiliar with them and may initially feel inadequate about participating. These students need encouragement and some time to learn how the medium constrains and enables their message exchange. For example, an adult male technical writing student expressed his frustration with his first experience in an academic chat room. As our first chat conference, I asked students to share project ideas and to form collaborative groups, according to their mutual interests and goals. Brad explained:

> We were assigned to brainstorm amongst ourselves to come up with ideas for proposals and to form groups. I thought that this was a great idea to help get the ball rolling
and to break the pressure of the assignment. However, it turned out to be inefficient for me because I couldn't read and reply to a statement in a timely manner that would be understood by the readers. There were so many conversations going on at the same time that everything I read seemed to be out of context. So I turned from my screen and began discussing ideas with the nearest available person to me. We decided to become partners.

What Brad's discussion shows is that he had trouble understanding the various simultaneous conversations. There is a lot of information to process when eighteen students are participating in a chat room discussion, making students who have not used chat programs before feel bombarded and overwhelmed. To adapt and participate effectively with others, students have to develop a way of making sense of the data and getting used to the rapid delivery of multiple writers' messages. Reassuring students that this flurry of activity is part of the process helps them to overcome initial frustration.

Another example of how inexperience may inhibit chat room productivity is offered by an eighteen-year-old male technical writing student, Bryan, who told me in an e-mail message that he was uncomfortable with the speed of chat dialogue. He said, “I couldn't keep up with the discussion. By the time I typed out a response, the conversation was on something else, and so I just deleted my message and tried to read up on what was being discussed. Then, same problem of being too slow would happen. I just couldn't get in on it.” Bryan's frustration with the writing-based dialogue is not unusual, particularly for those who do not type quickly or aren't used to writing interactively. Moreover, students such as Bryan, who feel less capable as writers, tend to be less assertive in chat rooms, perhaps from a sense of self-consciousness about their writing. However, guided chat room interaction with practice and play can boost confidence in writing.

Clearly, difficulties with adapting to chat room messaging relate not only to computer literacy but to the specific context of computer conferencing. In fact, this was my problem for the first couple of years that I started to use academic chat rooms in writing classes. During an honors composition course, I remember asking the small group of students, “Can you see the difference between my long messages that take a while to write and your short, interactive, and responsive messages?” What was clear is that I was still writing elaborate position statements with support, just as I had been taught to do as a graduate student. However, in chat, long messages are not effective because they take too long and they reflect a prioritizing of single-authored writing as opposed to the collaborative writing that students do in chat rooms. What makes good writing in chat rooms is not the same as good writing in an extended essay, for example. I had to curb my own learned behaviors of unidirectional writing to adapt to this new medium of intercommunication. This point is important to discuss with students so that they develop their understanding and application of chat room writing conventions.

To achieve the goal of 100% participation among students, teachers have to monitor conferences carefully to know who is sending messages and who isn't. If a student is not participating, teachers can inquire about the student's feelings. For example, I directed a message to a male basic writing student, Tom, who had not sent a single message during the initial icebreaker chat: “Tom, did the storm hit your home or work place?” By asking this direct but unthreatening question, I attempted to encourage his participation.
Indeed, it worked. It seems that some students need that direct invitation to participate, whether they are in oral group discussions or in computer chat rooms. Once invited, they interact. Also, teachers must draw out shy students who have communicative anxieties about being ignored by others or about being sent inflammatory messages. Critics such as Daisley have argued that being ignored by others is emotionally devastating. With this knowledge, teachers can discuss the effects of rejection and encourage students to include everyone in the conversations.

To orient students to chat room protocols, I ask students to chat about what they think comprises a successful and unsuccessful conference, during which they usually identify responsibility toward others as a key factor. Here are two representative responses of the class’s conceptions of successful and unsuccessful chat room dialogue: “A successful chat is one in which all comments are responded to and all questions are answered. It is one where no one person gets left out, by design or accident [. . .] . An unsuccessful chat is where people just want to ‘listen in’ so to speak. It is where everyone is waiting for someone else to say something so you end up watching a blank screen” and “A successful interchange is everyone participating actively [. . .] . Insufficient responses make the interchange appear slow, tiring, and dry. Questions are not answered properly or jokes are not responded to with laughter. I would rate that as unsuccessful chat.” Both students define responsive messaging as critical to successful conferencing.

In addition to this discussion about responsibility, teachers can establish the ground rules for what is acceptable and effective participation in the classroom chats. In turn, students share responsibility for each other through respectful participation. Elaborating on the connections between active learning, critical writing, and collegiality in collaboration are useful in getting the point across without having to invoke the university policy on appropriate academic conduct. However, I do at times have to reinforce ethical conferencing practices when a student does not uphold them, a problem addressed in the next section.

**Approaches to Teacher and Student Interaction**

As I work to construct an active learning space, I define appropriate moderator roles for my interaction with students in chat rooms. Moderator roles comprise student-teacher dynamics as well as particular responsibilities, which include welcoming new chat participants, facilitating dialogue, fostering a sense of community, setting ground rules, and enforcing the rules of etiquette. In addition, teachers must construct task-focused chat activities that keep students working toward a goal. As a moderator, the teacher needs to make the best use of chat conferencing, allowing inspired and motivated students to develop strands of dialogue. Confused and inquisitive students also need the discursive space to articulate questions for clarification and elaboration. Like people in conversations, those in chat exchanges need some room to develop, to build rapport, gather information, and make decisions. My goal in chat is not to homogenize student responses but to provide options and to encourage students to contribute in ways that allow them to experiment, explore, teach, inquire, challenge, understand, and interrelate. Moreover, I want to encourage chat room dialogue that is stimulating in order to foster both students’ curiosity and their enjoyment of language,
the medium, and the subjects of the discussions. An appropriate moderator role also promotes a critical perspective on the technology used.

To construct a more comprehensive sense of moderator roles, I considered scholarship on participant roles, participant styles of exchange, and moderator roles (Peha; Hardy, Hodgson, and McConnell; Kerr). Since the research did not fully address how I might co-construct intellectual, social, and political writing spaces with students, I began to search for words that would describe dynamic and collaborative teacher-student interaction. In the next section, I analyze various approaches to moderating student conferences to present readers with strategies for successful chat.

**Moderator Roles**

Since the most common term in computer-mediated conferencing scholarship has been “moderator,” this is where I began my inquiry. Considering the various connotations of the word, I realized that to be a moderator suggests that a teacher encourages students to avoid intense expression in order to have messages that are uniformly moderate. More specifically, the word, “moderate,” calls to mind concepts such as conservatism, status quo, and caution. In contrast, I want students to struggle in learning, to challenge norms, and to imagine alternatives. I don’t want to erase difference or level out intensity because intensity enervates action by providing a powerful impetus for change. For example, a female student named Janice boldly posed a rhetorical question, “Why are films with men enjoyed by everyone and films with female casts stupidly referred to as ‘CHICK FLICKS’?” Her frustration about the double standard comes through in her use of the criticism “stupidly” and the upper-case letters, which typically signify shouting, emotional emphasis, and anger. Janice’s message signified that she was shouting her frustration and criticism of the position that films with female casts are only enjoyed by women, and not by men. If I were to “moderate” this conference by urging her to temper her intensity, I might have attempted to deflate the intensity of Janice’s frustration at the biased reception of women as subject matter in film; this approach would undermine the power of Janice’s feminist critique. Furthermore, if I were to silence or take control over her messaging, I would undermine my goals of promoting students’ critical literacy, sense of agency, and political activism. Therefore, “moderator” doesn’t fully accommodate my pedagogical goals. Instead, I encouraged further debate on the topic by asking, “What makes a ‘chick flick’ unsuitable to a male audience and suitable for a female audience?” As a result, students produced an energetic discussion about our culture’s values regarding women and communication, work, art, relationships, and so forth.

Another common term in composition pedagogy is “facilitator,” which literally means “one who makes easier or less difficult” (OED 1989). In part, facilitation accurately describes the process of assisting students in accessing conferencing software and learning messaging conventions. While I strive to provide clear and simple instruction about using the software, I am not trying to make communication appear easy to perform. As teachers of writing know, effective rhetoric is never easy to achieve, either in print-based writing or electronic writing. What makes computer conferences peculiarly challenging is that students send their messages to multiple audience members in
rapid electronic delivery. Recognizing the substantial challenges of time and audience that academic chat rooms pose, I want to complicate electronic written exchange for students who may have popular notions of entertainment-oriented Internet chat rooms.

Without being reductive, teachers should encourage students to discover all the possible uses of electronic media by directly asking, for example, “How could this medium of communication serve our group work, class discussions, and sharing of out-of-class assignments?” In response to this chat message from me, composition students sent thoughtful messages such as the following from Bruce: “I like the convenience of discussing my part of the paper with my partner who can respond to me from any terminal on campus or at her apartment.” While this previous message asserts the value of using conferencing to complete collaborative writing assignments, another composition student, Lili, questioned its usefulness in another context: “I’d rather talk than type if we’re in the same room. It just doesn’t make sense to me.” This counter position had to be addressed in order to show this student the important distinctions between oral talk and computer chat. Further, this question warranted discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of each form of communication in terms of achieving particular pedagogical goals. The chat accomplished more than an oral lecture from me because all students could participate in the discussion, which would have been limited by number of speakers and points of view in an oral discussion. Considering what we accomplished as a class during this discussion, I didn’t so much facilitate, meaning simplify, exchange as enable students to develop a more complex understanding of the media of chat and speech in terms of how, why, when, and with whom to use each medium.

A term that may better describe the rhetorical action I was performing in the example above is “intervention,” which suggests interference in the communication among students. The connotations of “intervention” have both violent (military) and proactive implications (Alcoholics Anonymous) in popular discourse. In academic contexts involving computer-assisted rhetoric, James E. Porter advocates an interventionist presence in classroom conferences, promoting ethical writing practices: “[. . .] teachers should not try to control their students’ writing, but [. . .] in their effort to avoid control they should not give up their role as intervener, their role as teachers of commitment” (135).

As “interveners,” teachers have to control undesirable behaviors, promote desired behaviors, and, as a last resort, take punitive actions for prohibited behaviors. If other students’ well being and respect are at stake, then I have to adopt the role of “intervener,” by asserting the codes of university conduct or at least initiating a discussion along these lines. For instance, while working with students in a classroom chat among a small honors composition class, I had to address the various legal issues related to a student named Tom, who played a practical joke on another student Jim. Since the class was very small, students had gotten to know one another quite well and shared a friendly, informal relationship. The prank occurred when Jim left his computer terminal without logging off the system, leaving his account information still current and accessible by anyone. To teach Jim a lesson about the security risks of not logging off the system properly and, in turn, providing others with access to his account, Tom wrote the following message through Jim’s
account: “I am gay.” During the next class session, I discussed several relevant issues with students. First of all, there was the legal problem of Tom posing as Jim and using his account. Even in jest, using another’s account is a misconduct that violates academic integrity. Second, there was the issue of homophobia, which can have potentially harmful consequences. If classmates perceived Jim as “coming out” as a gay man, some students may have reacted with gossip, exclusion, verbal abuse, and even violence. Third, the manner in which Tom tried to embarrass Jim into learning his lesson by causing suspicion about his sexual orientation had homophobic implications on Tom’s part.

As a result, we all learned valuable lessons about chat room participation, practical jokes, and university policies concerning student accounts and security protection. As the intervener, I initiated critical analysis of the message’s emotionally charged meanings. While intervention as critique and challenge accurately describes what I do with students in chat, I feel that the term “intervener” connotes intrusive policing, which I rarely have to do with students. Mostly, I provide feedback about students’ chat writing to encourage participation and critical reflection.

Another term I have come across in discussions about leveling the hierarchy within student-teacher interactions is “negotiation.” Like mediation, negotiation involves at least two differing parties and often also includes an intermediary agent, who enables a compromise or decision, agreeable to all parties. However, unlike most negotiation situations that aim for closure or decision-making, successful chat exchanges often are designed to be exploratory or expressive, not resolute or consensual. While making decisions is one action chat users perform, chat exchanges also are used to complicate issues and to discover competing perspectives and courses of action.

For example, in a chat about the ethical elements of inflammatory language online, students had differing opinions about whether it was unethical to “flame” (trade angry insults) online. Some thought that flaming was “stupid” or “a waste of time”; others thought it was “fun” and “funny to see others’ reactions”; and still others thought that flaming was “mean,” “rude,” and “hurtful.” As students articulated views, they found both common ground and differing views, surprising some who could not imagine a conflicting position to their own. Therefore, I find the term “negotiator” inadequate to describe attempts to draw out differences rather than to put an end to them in students’ writing. As an alternative to consensus, I ask students to consider what they believe, what they can support, and what they are willing to act upon and why—this describes a dynamic critical rhetoric, in which I play a part as students build an interactively written text.

Another term, “coordinator,” denotes the tasks of scheduling and regulating participants as teachers do in conducting course-based chat room assignments. However, teachers can’t control chats in the same way that coordinators control speaking conventions. Like conversations, chat room discussions are responsive to participant’s input, which makes exchanges fluid rather than scheduled and orderly. For example, an upper-level technical writing student Mary, had the relevant background and expertise on the group’s project topic, and, therefore, answered members’ questions and guided the direction of the writing and research. Also, Mary praised helpful contributions by other students: “I like that idea. It will work well with the stuff I have on why
this building needs to be torn down completely instead of remodeled.” In addition, Mary solicited volunteers to complete work: “We still need the data on cost of dumping the demolished building remnants. Can someone do that by next class?” If I had coordinated this group’s interactions, I might not have used Mary’s expertise, which allowed her to anticipate problems and work needs; I might have squelched her effective leadership, which enabled this group to move forward on their assignment and collaborate successfully. As a coordinator, not only might I have encouraged Mary and other students to be passive, but I would have also done a disservice to the group’s progress because I did not have the expertise on building demolition or construction to guide them effectively. Instead, I promoted students’ agency in group projects, not my own authority in order to enhance their learning, which coordinating does not fully enable me to do.

Similar to the role of guiding students is leading them, which also suggests going first and taking the initiative. In creating an assignment, teachers act first by setting up assignments and activities, taking the first step toward their learning and guiding them through learning experiences to a new place of understanding. We define requirements and delegate tasks to our students. However, in this model of teacher-student interaction, the teacher possesses the authority of the leader while students are the followers, doing as the teacher does. What is problematic here is that some of my students have more experience with computer conferencing than I do. Being a role model places emphasis on the teacher’s performance as ideal, ignoring the possibilities for students teaching each other how to be effective electronic writers. In my concept of interaction with students, we take turns as leaders and followers. Furthermore, to insist on my own authority as the role model would hinder the class’s learning, including my own, which would be a pedagogical mistake.

For example, technical writing students with much experience in chat writing taught the class how to use various nonverbal cues in our messages to convey emotions, actions, and gestures (i.e., 😊, which suggests a smile or pleasure). As a result of the technical writing class discussions, I learned how vital these symbols are in clearly constructing the tone, a writer’s identities, and writer-reader relationships in electronic messages. Moreover, my students taught me that real-time chat exchange enables the class to share in the teaching as well as the learning—a lesson we discussed as we defined the characteristics of our chat room exchanges and relationships. Students showed me that we could be immersed in the act of writing as discursive play and experimentation, participating in a game of literacy education, which we all enjoyed and responded to with intensity and genuine curiosity (Daisley). In turn, students took on their responsible teaching roles with pride and serious application.

**Conclusions about Teacher and Student Interactions**

In this somewhat exploratory essay, I’ve identified a series of attitudes, behaviors, responsibilities, tasks, desires, power dynamics, and models of interaction with students in a context of cooperative learning. Perhaps the best way to approach this dilemma is not to determine what role teachers ought to assume toward all students in all contexts. Rather, I advocate that teachers determine what relationships they can coconstruct with students in order to best achieve pedagogical goals.
As teachers build interlocutor relationships with students in course-based chat rooms, we shift reading and writing roles, we share responsibilities of leadership and team support, we mutually invite each other to participate, and we establish the conventions and opportunities for discussion within the community and cyberspace that is our classroom. Seeing interaction with students in terms of relationships that are constantly in flux elicits a more responsive approach to individual student concerns, particular group dynamics, and unique contexts. What I’ve attempted to do is explore the variety of tasks, responsibilities, and roles that teachers consider as they initiate and engage students in critical language exchange in academic chat rooms.

By perceiving students to be in a relationship with instructors, teachers disrupt traditional roles and subject positions of knower and nonknower. No longer should we think of teachers as doing things to students or visa versa. Rather, teachers and students are engaged in interactive learning made possible in chat rooms. Approaching chat rooms as a series of relationships with students promotes an awareness of the dynamic exchanges of words, symbols, ideas, power, and roles in which teachers and students participate. Once writing instructors imagine and promote a variety of interactive relationships in course-based chat rooms, they will more effectively inspire audience awareness and rhetorical sensitivity.

Works Cited


Christyne A. Berzsenyi is an assistant professor at Penn State University, Wilkes-Barre, where she teaches basic writing, technical writing, advanced business writing, honors composition, and women’s studies courses in computer classrooms. Her research includes rhetoric and ethics in computer-mediated composition and mass media.

---

**Research Assembly Midwinter Conference**

**February 9–11, 2001**

The annual midwinter conference sponsored by the NCTE Assembly for Research will take place February 9-11, 2001, at the University of California-Berkeley Graduate School of Education. The theme this year is “New Literacies for New Times: Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning for the 21st Century.” For program details and registration information, contact Caroline T. Clark, Language, Literacy, and Culture, School of Teaching and Learning, 222A Ramseyer, 29 W. Woodruff Ave., Columbus, OH 43210-1177; phone: 614-688-5449; e-mail: clark.644@osu.edu. Registration deadline is **January 9, 2001**. For hotel reservations, contact the Durant Hotel, 2600 Durant Ave., Berkeley, CA 94704; phone: 800-2DURANT or 510-845-8981. You must reserve a room by **January 9, 2001**, to receive the special conference rate.