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Teaching with synchronous technologies symposium

Mastering online chat as a tutorial tool

Friday 15th December 2017

Dr Michael M Smith SFHEA, FRGS
UHI Programme Leader: MSc Sustainable Rural Development

Email: michael.smith@uhi.ac.uk
Tel. 01851 770 407

Preparing, Delivering and Managing Online Synchronous Chat Tutorials.

http://www.uhi.ac.uk/rural

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Synchronous Chat as an education tool has a limited amount of literature (Johnson 2006). One of the only published articles on our own practice came from Geller & Mackay (2002) entitled '*Using Netmeeting for Learning & teaching at the UHI Millennium Institute*'

"*Good discussion provides opportunities for learners to share their experiences and connect them to their current learning... This concept of cognitive scaffolding supports the development of more complex (higher order) thinking through interaction.*" (Brierton *et al*. 2016: 15)

"*Small group collaborative learning in which students have opportunity for critical discussion is a key element of effective teaching and learning in Higher Education.*" (Pilkington & Walker, 2003: 41).

"*Synchronous online chat has been largely ignored as a medium for productive group discussions between distance learning students and their tutors.*" (Burnett 2003: 247)

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- **Perceived Benefits of Online Chat Tutorials for Higher Education**

Online Tutorial Chats are intended and demonstrated to be "…*opportunities for students to better understand the material by hearing others' interpretations while sharing their own*." (Curtis, 2004: 143)

Online Synchronous Chat "…*provides access to immediate information and feedback so students can strengthen their understanding and correct any misconceptions.*" (Bowler 2009:5)

"….*chats give learners the opportunity to transform their personal meaning into shared solutions through a nonlinear process of asking questions, exchanging information, connecting ideas, and defending solutions. Chats provide a space in which to explore the multidimensional nature of an issue in an informal way.*" (Stein *et al*. 2007: 113)

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Perceived Problems of Online Chat Tutorials for Higher Education

Problems with synchronous chat tutorials include:
"*..getting students online at the same time, difficulty in moderating large-scale conversations, lack of reflection time for students, and intimidation of poor typists..*" (Branon & Essex, 2001: 36).

The lack of paralinguistic cues may cause a reluctance to share emerging thoughts and ideas: it is hard to gauge others' reactions to comments and easy to misinterpret tone or content. (Maier & Warren 2000)

Several participants can simultaneously compose and post responses to the same comment, resulting in multi-stranded conversations. This can cause a lack of focus. (Burnett 2003)

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Theoretical and Pedagogical Context

The instructional effectiveness of synchronous text-based communication has not been well-researched…There is some evidence that students enjoy synchronous chat and develop academic skills as they participate, although the online e-tutoring abilities of staff affects the quality of synchronous chat events (Johnson 2006).

In this model, tutors will work to facilitate a team of motivated participants who will be encouraged to develop a '*community of practice*' or '*community of inquiry*' within their peer group. A deep form of understanding and learning is possible from this reflective and participatory approach if students engage to the level required. Developing a sense that 'you are all in it together' or camaraderie (Brown, 2001), is important when facilitating such learning approaches and this can be achieved by regular synchronous communications from all participants in the module. This need for the development of a 'sense of community' is recognised by many researchers in the field (Rovai, 2000; Salmon, 2003; Wickersham & McGee, 2008; Gerber et al, 2008; Skinner, 2009).

Preparing for Live Synchronous Events

Wang (2005) contends that tutors must **re-engineer their thinking and approach** to successfully facilitate online synchronous chat. Wang (2005), Anderson *et al.* (2006) and Duemer *et al*. (2002) identify the following strategies as being important to illicit student participation and thinking abilities:

- **Thought provoking questions at start (and towards end)**
- **Probing and comparison questions**
- **Developing a sense of community**
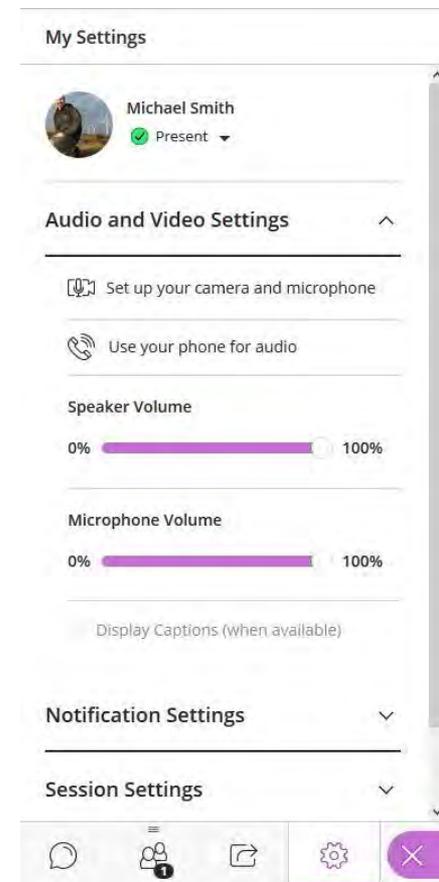
Examples of my Advance Preparation Notes

"The successful province drains the life out of the unsuccessful, and without protection against the strong, the weak have no chance" (Schumacher 1973) – is this a representation of modern day globalisation? – explain any parallels that might be made here….or maybe it is too radical a statement for you – why?

*There remains the viewpoint that **globalisation is just an extension of the former 'British Empire', a modern day equivalent** if you like, used to provide access to natural resources and fuel developed-world industrialisation in the present day. Any justification to such an attitude do you think? Any evidence you can think of that might support such an assertion?*

*"**Nothing succeeds like success, nothing fails like failure and nothing stagnates like stagnation" (Schumacher Society 1982).** To what, if any extent, does this quote have relevance to globalisation from a developing nation's perspective? Can you think of any evidence that might support this (e.g. released by Oxfam)?"*

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Linking Past Synchronous Chat Sessions to the Current one is important

As in the on-campus classroom setting the context of the current day's Chat is of importance to enable student's to understand how the module is building their knowledge of a weekly basis. An example of how I do this is here:

"*Last chat session we looked at the inter-related issues of sustainable consumption, global trade, eco-efficiency and the issues surrounding the 'global commons'.* We questioned the level of resource-use happening in this generation to feed the high level of consumption occurring in Western countries in this generation. Apart from the suggestion that decoupling resource-use from consumption had to be a key priority, we largely came to the conclusion that a growing human population's level of resource use in 'the Anthropocene' is a growing concern as population increases are correlating directly with the growth of consumption worldwide. Globally, habitats for nature and so related biodiversity were shown to be under threat. **How can we hope to achieve sustainable development in such a context? Surely we have some major conflicting priorities here as a species?**"

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Managing and Facilitating Live Synchronous Events
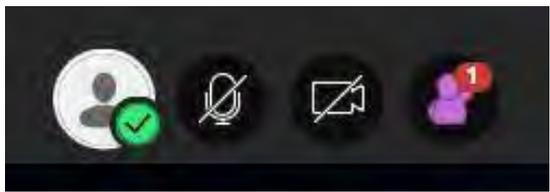
Blackboard Collaborate's 'hand-up' is a start, but with most VLE tools, it is less than optimal. Students need to know how to participate and learn online. This experience must be as cohesive and synced as possible. To do this we continue to adopt the 'OK' protocol. It is the best method to keep the synchronicity in Blackboard Collaborate and other Chat software. Students are told about this at the beginning of every module. Here is an example:

"When I ask a question it does not work if everyone starts typing and we get answers for the next 5 minutes - often even after the discussion may already have moved on. What you need to do is 'win the floor' – to do this - simply type 'OK' and return in the text box. When I see that, I (and everyone else) will see that you have indicated you wish to take this question on and answer it. If there is more than one 'OK' at any one time I will state the order in which you are allowed to reply."

The 'OK' Protocol – Facilitating Online Synchronous Chat

"Whilst the first person who has 'won the floor' by typing 'OK' is busy writing their contribution (the person who 'OK'ed first whom I identified) the rest of the people (who OK'ed) can be writing their views too, ready for a subsequent contribution if you have also entered an 'OK' too – this means that you will be ready with your contribution after the person ahead of you in the order to reply, has posted."

"Simply open a Microsoft Windows Notepad window behind your Chat software and type your contributions there and copy and paste back and fore by using Ctrl C (Copy) and Ctrl V (paste)."

Online Synchronous Chat (OSC) and Optimal Class Sizes

- **2-4** participants - Less than optimal – large onus on tutor's role in facilitating session
- **5-9** participants – Optimal class – tends to result in high participation of a manageable level
- **10-13** participants – On the margin – becoming difficult to keep on task and keep control of order and participants
- **13+** participants – Arguably beyond the capability of this model of delivery, but lends itself to tailored Q&A online chat sessions – 'come along and ask a question of your tutor'

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Are all topics suitable for Online Synchronous Chat?

In our experience, topics that lend themselves well to discussion and debate where differing perspectives exist, are most suitable for OSC –e.g. the pros and cons of globalisation. These can be interactive debate-based discussions.

In other instances more scientific shorter sessions centred around images displayed on Blackboard Collaborate are also valuable – e.g. recognising the features of a river system in the Cairngorms. These sessions are more about information broadcasting and checking knowledge.

Conclusions: Online Synchronous Chat (OSC) as a Tutorial Tool

To plan and implement an effective OSC tutorial for distance education students requires to consider and address the following issues:

- Planning and preparation
- Management and organisation
- Facilitation and participation
- Topic and so format and length of event
- Numbers, suitability and approach

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- # Interested in knowing more? Key References:

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