# Chat as New Pedagogy: The Emerging Communities of Learners in Higher Education

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a new pedagogy in which college professors use computer information technology as a means to enhance effective collaboration. The World Wide Web, e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, and Instant Messaging are services offered on the Internet. As a new medium of communication, this emerging technology offers educators unprecedented opportunities to augment or fully devote courses to innovative formats. Chat provides a venue for communities of learners to communicate in real time. A chat room is a Web application that allows two or more people to type messages to each other at the same time. There are many types of chat rooms used by online learning communities via the Internet.

Communication is integral to the overall process of collaboration (Brown, Mittan, & Roen, 1997). The most common place for chat activity is on Web sites or computer programs. The virtual classroom is basically a chat application offered by the university with access privileges extended to students enrolled in a class. Chat activity can be further defined as Web-based communication in real-time. It is interactive, allowing individuals to communicate on any number of Web-based discussion channels. Chat is synchronous, providing users with highly desirable real-time networking abilities. While general chat rooms are a popular phenomenon, there is also a burgeoning market for topic-driven chats in which participants can talk, ask questions, and interact with people. These chat rooms are online gathering places and in certain contexts become virtual learning communities. Information in a chat room can be obtained by simply reading the continuous conversation on screen. Chatters can also request information by posting questions and comments. The chat room participants can dispense information by posting conversation in response to another participant's post or by beginning a new topic.

Synchronous and asynchronous communications provide an opportunity for student interaction that further enhances the learning process (Murray, 1999). Chat is still in a refining process as this form of collaborative learning continues to evolve in academia. The new chat-collaborative paradigm is changing the way pedagogies are implemented. Advancements in information technology provide an augmentation that college students consider a natural part of their communication culture. The amelioration of chat is allowing creative collaborations to take place across distant sites. Chat's enculturation process provides the community of learners' unprecedented interaction that probes new depths of understanding, problem-solving, and learning.

## BACKGROUND

The educational community is beginning to realize possibilities made available through the chat medium. Chat is considered a contemporary mode of communication that is gradually being implemented in online educational networks. *The Forum on Technology in Education* (Dnkauth, 1999) notes, "How we use technology in the classroom is more important than if we use it at all" (p. 1). Chat is an excellent resource for building a community online, but more specifically, it can be an effective pedagogy. The chat format is an essential component of distance education, where students do not communicate face-to-face. Chat, as a communication resource, helps facilitate online conferencing to support collaborative activities. The process of creating an online community requires participants to be tech savvy, collaborative, and reflective. Summarizing their research on chat, Russell and Halcomb (2002) note,

*This single classroom activity produced two behavioral products: (1) first, the virtual group discussion*

*itself, complete with the increased motivation for individual participation and the benefits of collective group insight on the discussion topic; and (2) The capacity for the individual student to go back and summarize and reflect on the experience served to extend the benefits of the activity beyond the classroom and served as a catalyst for many of the students to help in the consolidation of the ideas and thoughts which had emerged during the discussion. Chat can play a vital role in communal online education; serving as a forum where participants can engage in an expeditious transaction of ideas and experiences.* (p. 3)

Chat as a mode of instruction provides interactive learning, meaningful instruction, enhanced communication and collaboration, and a more timely assessment of the learning effectiveness in comparison with traditional methods. Bonk (2002) states:

*In terms of collaboration, the chat tools nurture learner brainstorming and questioning, presenter clarifications and explanations, role-play and private one-to-one mentoring. They can foster the collection of immediate responses to an idea from learners around the globe.* (p. 5)

From an instructional standpoint, teacher/facilitator training should establish and advance quality experiences in the online chat format. The capacity for professional development to advance experimentation, innovation, and implementation of effective communication technologies should be continuous. Chat requires universities to establish technologies with strong infrastructures and a commitment to provide ongoing training. Also, in an increasingly competitive market, administrators are compelled to know the generational characteristics of potential students. Generation Y'ers, or the Millennium Generation, are ages 12 to 29 and "have spent one-third of their life on the Internet…are very tech savvy…totally plugged in… and variety to them isn't lots of things; it is a few things that change frequently" (Chico State Inside, 2006, ¶ 6). Generational characteristics are not merely a matter of young vs. old. Rather, it is a transitioning process from one generation to another in which values are determined.

## The Collaborative Paradigm

"There is no mistaking the shift in society's focus from thriving on competition to the need for collaboration. Therefore, education must prepare workers for these environments" (Bonk, 2002, ¶ 3). Brown and Gray (1995) observe, "When a company acknowledges the power of community, and adopts elegantly minimal processes that allow communities to emerge, it is taking a giant step toward the 21st century" (p. 1). The advent of computer technology coupled with a growing accessibility of communication channels have caused collaborative learning to undergo a metamorphose of sorts. New and promising technology-based collaborations are being designed and implemented in universities.

Nichols (2002), states, "Communities of Practice are groups of people in organizations that form to share what they know, to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work and to provide a social context for that work" (¶ 8). Communities of practice serve a valuable purpose in business by transferring knowledge and expertise from one individual to another in a socially engaging format beneficial to all. These communities are unlike a task force, which is given a specific duty or function to be performed and upon completion of the task the group has no other purpose. They are disparate from the concept of team. Teams operate with contingencies for the varied personalities and roles that evolve in team processes. The community of practice concept is an innovative idea, another seminal training notion that higher education has borrowed from business. The challenge for higher education is to take this concept and ultimately make it an adaptive pedagogy. Chat communities in an educational environment can facilitate, nurture, and enhance learning. Faculty portals developed to teach these concepts may prove to be visionary.

## The Collaborative Nature of Online Chat

The collaborative perspective recognizes that students are active participants in the process of constructing their own knowledge (Kafai & Resnick, 1996). Therefore, it is essential that higher education faculty contemplating the use of chat understand the issue of

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