



Preparing for, and managing chat sessions

Quick guide for designers and instructors

For Blackboard Vista 4.x

Chat (and the associated whiteboard) allows you to interact with students in real time, through text messaging and sharing of the whiteboard. Here are some tips on getting the most from your chat sessions.

Prepare your students

Chat sessions need to be announced to students well ahead of time and have clear guidelines for acceptable contributions. Their role in assessment needs to be made clear to students.

For example:

- You may announce that a chat will held at a particular time and date.
- It will cover certain topics and will last for two hours.
- Students are to follow established protocols (e.g. how to 'raise their hand' to respond to a question; how to signal to gain your attention)
- Obscene, disparaging and personal attacks are unacceptable.
- You will be monitoring and evaluating all postings.
- All students in group x and y are expected to contribute to the discussion, which will form part of the overall assessment.
- Students may contact you ahead of time by email if they have any questions or concerns.

Your role in chat

During the chat you may need to:

- encourage some group members to contribute
- ask others privately to allow space for contributors
- lead the chat back to the point when it strays
- provide positive feedback on contributions, including constructive comments on misconceptions so that further contributions are not stifled
- implement rules ahead of time about hand raising or passing the pen (see above)
- change to a whiteboard for the illustration of certain points
- debrief group members
- provide feedback at the end of the chat (e.g. in the form of a summary of outcomes).

All these activities will contribute to your own social presence, and encourage participants to develop their own.

Managing chat sessions

Chat sessions with more than ten participants become hard to manage. It's a good idea to consider student numbers and staff and teaching resources before building chat sessions into the formal teaching program. You may wish to link them to tutorials, or informal sessions instead (see below).

Chat sessions with 4-10 participants are quite manageable; however large groups can be very difficult to manage and are not recommended.

Issues to be aware of:

- More than one "conversation" may develop - causing confusion and overload.
- Too many users (i.e. >10) will reduce the quality of a session.
- Users with slow typing and/or screen-reading speed may find the environment frustrating. [You may need to organise for pauses to allow the slower students to catch up.]
- 'Shy' users can become overwhelmed by those who 'talk a lot' (similar to face-to-face sessions).
- The synchronous nature of the tool (i.e. at the same time) means that some students may not be able to be involved.
- Mature age students are less likely to be involved at first, where as many younger students are quite used to online chat environments (this is of course a generalisation).

Given the above, management of chat sessions is a demanding skill and takes time to develop. A chat session needs to be guided and "massaged" to ensure it stays on track and has worthwhile outcomes. The danger here though is over-controlling a session by dominating the conversation, providing too many answers, or asking too many closed questions. Well-developed questioning and group management techniques are as necessary here as in the face-to-face classroom.

Need more information?

[Managing the Chat and Whiteboard tool for teaching](#) Step-by-step guide

[Netiquette for online communications](#) Quick guide

References:

Extract from the *Teaching Online Essentials* module: **Advancing communication & collaboration online**. © University of Tasmania, 2005