

RUNNING HEAD: Large Group Chats

Experiences and Perceptions of Large Group, Synchronous Discussions

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Background

Interpersonal interactions - discussions - are an integral part of any successful classroom. Participation in discussion, questioning, and information sharing have all been shown to be critical to the learning experience. In developing online courses, we must attend to the fact that students cannot work in isolation. They must have a vehicle for discussion and interaction. Online discussion rooms, or chat rooms, can provide such a mechanism. It is unfortunate, then, that the chat room as it is currently implemented and use in today's culture has something of a negative connotation. I believe that this is due in large part to the fact that there are no rules or protocols governing such chats. I believe that educators must find a model to use prior to implementing chats as a part of their teaching process.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to discover how students enrolled in a graduate level, web based learning class will view their experiences in a relatively large, synchronous discussion group. My goal in this research was to try to discover how participants in online synchronous chats perceive their interactions with others in a large group. My feeling is that the size of the group attempting a discussion is a factor in it's success. While discussions in a classroom can be conducted successfully with upwards of 20-30 participants, online discussions are hampered by the fact that the participants must read comments rather than listen. This makes following the thread of the discussion more difficult.

I am hopeful that the research I am doing will help to inform our understanding of online teaching. I think that it is far too often taken for granted that if something is new and technological that it's going to be a benefit for students. I want to see to it that we investigate this closely and make sure that it's done correctly.

Conceptual Context

My work with Drs. Norton and Sprague in the Integrating Technology in Schools Masters Degree Program provided a window onto ideas and practices that I had not considered during my fifteen years as a classroom teacher. In particular, the ideas of Vygotsky's and the social aspects of knowledge acquisition inspired me to change the way I viewed the design of learning activities and structures. I believe very strongly in the notion that knowledge is created through social situations. Authentic activities in the classroom promote the interaction between students and teachers. I am very curious to know if that same type of interaction can be duplicated in an online environment.

Much of what goes on in a classroom can be replicated in an online environment - content material can certainly be accessed on web pages, problems can be presented and solved using online tools, and the World Wide Web can be used to search for information related to a particular topic or idea.

One facet of the classroom experience that has yet to be replicated in an online environment, however, is that of interpersonal interaction. While we have certain tools in place to facilitate this interaction (e-mail, discussion boards, and instant messaging or chat rooms), it seems as though a set of rules to govern the dynamics of online discussions has yet to be created. When students and teachers are not situated in the same place/time with others, many of the rules we follow for discussions are not applicable. Thus, we are left without a model or framework in which to converse and share ideas.

In this study I hope to discover how students view their experiences in working collaboratively in an online environment, specifically a synchronous discussion. My experiences in the past lead me to suspect that the size of an online chat group has some bearing on it's

efficacy and the attitudes and perceptions of the participants.

It is clear to me that more and more teachers and schools will attempt to integrate online discussions in real time as part of their teaching practices and I believe that it is in our best interests to learn as much as we can about doing that. The fear that I have is that this type of learning experience will be implemented poorly and the innovation will die before it has a chance to be used successfully. This type of critical examination of a technological innovation has been lacking up to now. I have found that the speed with which technology is changing the face of education is far too fast for teachers to sit, breathe, and adopt innovations for very long. It is clear to me, after having been involved with Instructional Technology since it's very beginnings in the early '80s, that computers were viewed as the long sought after magic bullet that would revolutionize education. Literally billions of dollars were being spent on technology but, in my view, very little thought was given as to why or how the tools should be used in the classroom.

There has been a great increase in the number of teachers wishing to capitalize on the benefits of the Internet for communicating with students. The difficulty is that, inasmuch as this is a new medium, there are no models for successful interactions in existence. It is not enough to simply implement the tools. Teachers must be aware of the dynamics of online communication in order to provide students with the optimal opportunity for interaction.

I want to know if the tools of technology can provide a 'virtual space' where students can meet and share knowledge. If the answer to this question is "yes" then I need to discover the parameters of this 'space'. In other words, how can I, as the instructor, best design online opportunities that will promote learning. I have no idea if it's even possible. A lot of people do think it's possible, but I'm not sure that I'm one of them, yet.

I firmly believe that interaction with others is critical for learning to occur. All through our lives, in school, these interactions occur constantly. There is a body of research that strongly

suggests that knowledge is gained primarily in a social context. The question that I would like to have answered is, “How can we facilitate these interactions online?”. Can the dynamic of a spirited classroom discussion be replicated when the participants are not in the same room at the same time?

For many years I have used online discussion boards and online chats. I find both to be extremely interesting and useful. Generally, these discussions and chats are utilized by people around the country who share an interest in a topic. I find it very nice to be able to sit at home and connect with others without having to travel to a designated place at a designated time in order to work. My belief is that online chats have the potential to be a very valuable means of interaction for students and instructors. I think that when we can find the optimum conditions for conducting chats, we will be able to provide better opportunities for students.

I have been involved with the development of online courses for the past two years. This development has formed the basis for my professional specialization for the PhD program. My interest in this type of learning revolves around how we, as teachers, can best utilize the communication tools that we have available to us. Very often, teachers will simply demand use of the tools in a misguided attempt to mirror classroom interactions in an online setting. My research, teaching, and even learning in this arena has given me reason to believe that there has not been enough research done on how best to construct learning environments online.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) affords users the opportunity to interact in two different modes: Asynchronous, using discussion boards or e-mail and synchronously, using real-time chat (e. g. Instant messaging or chat rooms).

No matter what term is used for it – WebBased learning, online learning, distance learning, etc., there are a number of modes of instruction and interaction which replace those of the face-to-face classroom but which, obviously, have different rules and protocols.

My academic and professional interest in online learning has its roots in a number of different activities and experiences with which I have been involved. In reflecting on the reasons and motivations for this study, I realize that I have to come to terms with the fact that my interest is spurred almost as much by a passion for the topic as by a curiosity to see whether or not meaningful learning experiences can be designed and provided to students in an online environment. I think that the passion for the topic comes from the amount of time that I have spent online using chats with others - both in a personal and a professional capacity. I think that the potential for using synchronous chats is overlooked - or at least untapped. Like many innovations in the classroom, online chat has only been used superficially. It is true that I have a healthy amount of doubt regarding the efficacy of online learning in general, even as I work to design models for teaching and learning. I confess that, sometimes, I am something of a skeptic within my own field. I can see the benefits of technology, but I call myself a technology minimalist. That is to say that I maintain that technology for its own sake is not a good thing and can, in fact, be a detriment to the learning process.

Research Questions

Coming to rest on a set number of research questions has been an interesting part of this process. I began with an overall interest only in students experiences and perceptions of learning and interacting while involved in a large, synchronous online discussion. I wanted to know, essentially, what they thought of the process. Did they like it? Did they get confused by having so many people in the chat? Did they have technical troubles? Were they able to keep up with the conversation? I began to realize that these questions showed something of a bias on my part. They indicated that I might have had a preconception of technical difficulties, or the level of confusion that they might have felt, for example.

As I progressed through the semester and began to collect data, I found that the information that I was getting from the transcripts of interviews and observations as well as notes lead me to refine the questions that I wanted to answer. Specifically:

1. How are online synchronous chats conducted with relatively large groups?
2. What are the perceptions and experiences of participants in a large group, online chat?
3. How do participants in a large group, interactive chat view their level of interaction with others in the group?
4. What influences do students see on their level of participation and interaction in the chat?

Research Method

Setting

It is difficult to describe the ‘setting’ for this type of study. Clearly, the setting is virtual and really has no ‘place’. While I will be observing the participants for part of the study, there is no location for the study other than the nebulous, ‘cyberspace’. The setting might best be described in terms of the software and communications medium which will be used.

The ‘setting’, to use the standard word, is not exactly standard at all. Rather than conduct observations in a particular place, the observed interactions took place on the computer. If there could be anything that could be called the setting, I’d have to say that it is the BlackBoard course delivery system used at George Mason University. This system provides students with the opportunity to connect to a common, shared, “space” on the Internet and to interact with each other in real-time using the Virtual Classroom. While there are other virtual meeting spaces available to students, BlackBoard’s Virtual Classroom was chosen for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it offers the most robust tools for online collaboration. Students are able to simultaneously interact not only with text conversation, but also with a shared

whiteboard and web browser.

I initially harbored some concerns about the ‘setting’ for this study. I came to realize, however, that those things that were being observed and studied, of necessity, occurred only within the setting described above. That this was, in fact, a legitimate setting in which to conduct my research.

Validity and Assumptions

I didn’t foresee any special difficulties in doing this project. There were potential difficulties involved in the fact that the Web Based Learning course this spring is also my Internship for the PhD. program. In reflecting on how this might affect the study or the results, I can only imagine that I have a vested interest in seeing that the course which I am administering is successful for the mentors, the participants, and me. I confess that, while I am noting this as a potential problem area, I cannot see how this had any affect me as the researcher.

The issue of bias in this study is one that I spent some time wrestling with. My experiences with quantitative research made me feel as though the biases that I might have concerning this topic needed to be eliminated. However, conversations in class as well as readings showed that the bias is something that can never be eliminated. It simply needs to be recognized and allowed for in the interpretation of the data. Personal biases that I think I brought to the study included some of those described elsewhere in this paper. I have some doubt as to the efficacy and pedagogical quality of learning online. I understand and recognize that bias and have maintained an open mind and willingness to understand and appreciate the views of the participants in this study.

I initially had concerns about reactivity as well. My position in the setting was one of instructor and thus responsible for the grades for the course in which the participants were

enrolled. Interestingly, I believe that the nature of the study and the way in which the observations were conducted, removed most of that concern. Inasmuch as I was not physically visible to the students, then the concerns about reactivity were lessened or eliminated.

The question of description was eliminated without much concern. The transcripts of the online chats were generated automatically by the BlackBoard software. While there is no data concerning the reliability of the software (and my guess is that no one has yet questioned it) there is no reason to believe that the transcript that was generated was anything less than 100% accurate. This was a huge benefit in resolving any questions about description of what occurred in the chats. Furthermore, the transcripts for the chats has been available online for all of the participants to review. I have not had any of the participants indicate that they challenge the validity or accuracy of the information.

The interview for this study was tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The transcript was then reviewed against the tape once the transcription was complete. While it was extraordinarily difficult and time consuming, I made every effort to capture each word and characterize each pause and reflection wherever possible in the conversation.

The final source of data for this report was e-mail correspondence with the members of the chat group. Inasmuch as this data is delivered to me in text form, there is no doubt as to the validity of the words of the authors.

There are practical concerns that I have in engaging in this study. First and foremost, my experiences with being a facilitator for classes conducted online have given me reason to expect that there would be technical difficulties at some point during the process. Nowhere in the online course are there more technical difficulties than with the synchronous chat room. I expect that there will be participants who will have problems connecting to the web site, initiating the chat software, and operating the software once they are connected. In the past, we have dealt with

these both in a proactive and reactive manner. First, we (the course facilitators and I) prepare the students with in-class demonstrations of how to operate the software involved. Students are then encouraged to try the software before they are required to attend the chat session just to make sure that they are able to connect and use the virtual classroom. Once the chat has begun, facilitators will often get e-mail from students telling of problems they are having. The facilitators do what they can to help the students correct any problems.

I was also concerned about conducting research on a topic with which I was so familiar. By this I mean that I am quite familiar with the tools and processes involved in communicating online and I feared that I would run the risk of overestimating the abilities of the students in my classes. I can see sometimes in working with them that I often forget that they have not used the tools to the degree that I have. I made every effort to keep that in mind as I conducted the research.

Informants

The students of the Integrating Technology in Schools cohort participate in an online course in the spring semester of their studies. One facet of this course is to work collaboratively in small groups (3 - 7 students each) to discuss the topics using a module of BlackBoard called the Virtual Classroom. The Virtual Classroom provides virtual space for the students to 'meet' and discuss, synchronously, topics related to the course. The students utilized the Virtual Classroom at three points during the course. First, they met to discuss a particular topic related to the course with a faculty member moderating the discussion. Next, the small group met to discuss a topic without the presence of a moderator. Finally, the group met to discuss and produce a product concerning the course.

I chose the participants for the study based on the fact that, of all of the subgroups that

were created for the class, theirs was the largest. I chose this group primarily because I was interested in how the participants would react to working within a group that was larger, generally, than most online chat groups. All of the seven participants in this large group were of generally the same skill and expertise level as those in the rest of the class. Simply by virtue of the fact that their group was the largest were they chosen to investigate. I was struck by a line in Dr. Maxwell's book that made perfect sense to me. These people were 'privileged witnesses to an event'. They are the only group of the six online groups who were part of such a large chat. This made them ideal for the study. It was fortunate that all were able to participate in the scheduled online chat. One of my concerns was that, because of technical problems, some might not be able to connect. As it was, all seven were there and were able to chat for approximately 45 minutes during the first chat opportunity. Six of the seven participated in the 2nd chat and five participated in the third chat.

I think the presumption of reflecting on the relationships that are established among the participants of the study is that there is a physical presence which can lead to interaction and observation which creates that relationship. An interesting facet of conducting research on online learning is that most often the interactions are conducted at a distance and there is no meeting of the researcher and the participant - at least not in the conventional sense. On those occasions where I *have* come to meet students with whom I have worked, we invariably disclose to each other that we "pictured each other differently". Thus, I feel strongly that my relationships with the subjects of my study are colored by perceptions that are drawn from e-mails. Those e-mails and other interactions have given me the opportunity to get to know them over the course of the semester.

The person who volunteered for interviewing, Susanna, was a participant who lived near me. I had asked all of the members who lived in close proximity to me to participate in

interviewing and she was the only person who responded. She was quite willing to share her views and experiences with the project and she proved to be very vocal and colorful in her descriptions of the processes. While she had used personal chat software in the past (AOL Instant Messenger), she had never participated in any kind of group chat. Furthermore, her motivations for chatting had always been personal rather than professional. It was quite fortunate that Susanna volunteered to be interviewed as she provided some very good information on the chat processes.

Data Collection

I conducted the study using observation, interviews, and data collected through e-mail correspondence. As a participant in the first of the three chat sessions that I wished to investigate, I was able to observe the interactions that occurred, gauge the level of interest and frustration exhibited by the participants, and have first hand knowledge of how the discussion progressed. I also have access to a transcript of the session. This transcript is generated automatically by the Virtual Classroom software. For the second chat session of the group that I am researching, I had only the transcript to observe. From this data, I was able to discern information related to the participants' reactions to the size of the group, their interactions with one another, and their level of participation in the chat.

I began the analysis of my data with the archived transcript of the first of three chats that I wished to analyze for my paper. I found it a little more difficult to start the process of evaluating the chats for this class than I had anticipated. It seemed as though each of the many groups with which I met had a completely different character and flow to it. Some of them went quite smoothly with almost a party or "happy hour" atmosphere while others felt more like sitting in the waiting room at the dentist's office. I couldn't help but want to try to compare the

various groups' chats to try to discover differences and to perhaps discern why one group approached the chat differently from another - clearly quantitative!

As I reflected on the chats, it occurred to me that there really should not have been much difference in the nature of the chats. I thought that the 'cues' for talking and acting in certain ways in person were quite dependent upon the physical setting and the more physical characteristics of a group interaction - whether the participants are smiling, is there a loud and boisterous person in the group that makes everyone feel at ease, etc. With the online chat, those cues are taken away and, in effect, everyone 'looks' the same, they all have the same volume of voice, none speak with accent or inflection. I think that this revelation, if you can call it that, helped me to better analyze the data that I collected. I'm not sure that I knew what I was looking for before that point. I felt that I was somewhat closer to knowing. All of these thoughts came just before sitting down to deal with the accumulated data as I thought about the nature of what I was looking for.

I thought about this more as I began to deal with the pages and pages of transcripts that I had in front of me.

Blackboard software provides a text transcript of all of the virtual classroom chats. I began my analysis with this transcript online. It soon became apparent to me that I would not be able to make much sense of the information that I was seeing on the screen. For one thing, each person's comments in text were jumbled together and it was very difficult to get a sense of each discrete comment in the chat. To be perfectly honest, reading the chat from the screen, after the fact, was almost like the experience of actually being a part of the chat! It was fast, confusing, and difficult to see any sense in the flow of the conversation. My eyes continually had to scan back and forth in order to track who was speaking and what they were saying. Then I had to review back and number of lines in order to connect what one person had written in answer to

another person's comment or question. It was almost like I was a 'newbie' learning online chatting skills for the first time.

Table 1 below is a summary of the data types and collection dates:

Method	Date	Time	Data Recorded
Virtual Classroom Chat - 1	February 9, 2003	9:00 pm - 10:19 pm	Archive Transcript
Virtual Classroom Chat - 2	March 16, 2003	10:10 am - 10:57 am	Archive Transcript
Virtual Classroom Chat - 3	March 26, 2003	7:12 pm - 8:36 pm	Archive Transcript
Formal Interview - Susanna G.	April 27, 2003	1:00 pm - 1:57 pm	Audio Tape Transcription

To augment the observation of the group chat through my participation and transcript, I also chose to interview participants in the chat. In looking over the list of participants in the group that I am studying, I tried to think of characteristics that the students might possess that would make them good informants for the research. Despite the fact that I teach one of the three cohorts (and almost 1/2 of the students in the three groups) none of the participants in the chat group on which I was focusing knew me personally, nor have I had the opportunity to observe them or 'hang out' with them. Thus, I was left to use other criteria for selecting the interviewees. Since the group I am researching is made up of students from two cohorts, I opted to select one from each. My first thought was to interview two participants in a cohort that met near my home. This, selfishly, would facilitate interviewing them at their school or perhaps someplace local to each of us. Upon reflecting, I decided that I might gain more from getting a perspective from participants who come from somewhat different backgrounds - both in terms of their

experiences with the ITS program and in terms of their work conditions. Ultimately, it was a matter of asking for volunteers from those students who were geographically closest to my location. One of the students answered my call for volunteers and became the sole interviewee.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data for this study I was able to take advantage of the tools I had at my disposal. I copied the entire chat transcript from Blackboard and copied it into a blank word processor document. I was then able to format the archive in such a way that it was easier to read. To do this, I simply double-spaced the lines and created hanging indents for each speaker so it was easier to tell when the speaker had changed. I find that I'm able to read printed material far easier than from a computer screen - particularly long documents.

Once the document was formatted, I printed it and then went to read through the text. As was suggested in both the reading assignments and in class discussions, I allowed myself to read through the material once - line by line - in order to get a feel for the nature and flow of the chat. I was surprised and somewhat dismayed (as an instructor) at the amount of off-topic comments that were included in the transcript. It appeared to me in reading that the group was not discussing the topic at all! I made mental notes, and a few margin notes as I read through a second time, of topics and ideas which I might wish to explore in more detail later.

Between the second and third readings of the chat, I had formulated a rudimentary coding scheme to use in categorizing the comments in the chat. It appeared to me that the most obvious place to start in analyzing the material would be in terms of whether or not the comments were on- or off-topic. Perhaps because that was the first thing that jumped out at me on my first reading. I had thought to use color highlighting to indicate varying kinds of comments but once I reached a certain number of varieties I saw that this would be impractical. There weren't enough

colors of highlighters! My initial list of categories for the individual comments were: 1 - off topic comments; 2 - questions on topic; 3 - giving information on topic; 4 - question about the technology; 5 - answer about the technology; 6 - statements on topic. These worked well as organizational categories for initial analysis, but it was clear that I would have to develop substantive categories.

As I continued to work with the transcript I was able to see that a number of categories emerged - either concretely in the chats themselves or abstractly in my own mind. I began to realize that many of the ideas or questions that I had at the beginning of this process would need to be changed or adapted.

I began the process of assigning a code to each comment in the chat. Once that was complete, and I had a chance to look over my scheme, it dawned on me that this would only provide me with numerical data. I would have no more than a list of how many of each type of comment that was made. This might be interesting but hardly informative given the nature of my study.

I decided that a far more enlightening strategy to use would be one where I could better represent emerging themes and strands of conversation. This seems to be the thrust of connecting strategies where the data can be tied together to show relationships and sequence. This involved reducing the chat transcripts to chunks of data where participants are conversing with one another in a common theme or purpose.

I found that the chats themselves followed a certain flow and the types of interactions took on a certain flavor. I noted these on the transcripts themselves as coded with a color scheme representative of the nature of the category - protocol, etiquette, comfort level, participation, and interaction. I soon discovered that one of the things that I found myself looking for was the evolving protocol or system or etiquette, if you will, for chatting in the group. I discovered that

this, above all else, was ‘speaking’ to me from the chat.

I was anxious to begin the interview process. I had created an interview protocol that I hoped would elicit information about the chat protocols and structures. My research revolved around investigating the experiences of the participants in a chat. My analysis of the chat gave me something of a framework from which to develop my interview questions.

The experiences that the participants had in the chat room gave them a footing on which to develop their own rules of engagement while in a chat room. To be sure, some of the more experienced of the students have brought guidelines with them from other venues, but I’m finding it quite fascinating to see the emergence of a set of rules among this particular group.

Almost unanimously, the students characterize the chat experience as a positive one. Both in the interview and in the e-mail transcripts, it is apparent that the students find the experience enjoyable. I think that part of this might come from the fact that it is a new experience for them. It remains to be seen whether this enthusiasm for the medium will translate into an avenue for learning. I hope that my interview questions will shed light on this aspect of the study

Conclusions

Now that I have had the opportunity to review the chat transcripts, interview transcripts, e-mail and personal conversation data, I reached the point where it is appropriate to draw conclusions about the data that I have collected. The sheer volume of information has been daunting and it is sometimes difficult to decide whether or not there is anything to be learned from it! I confess that there were times where I found myself just looking at words on a page and just not able to draw a conclusion at all from the data.

I was able to identify five main categories in my observations of the chat transcripts. The

interactions of all of the participants in the large chat sessions were rich with information from which I was able to draw insights on those categories and, ultimately, provided clues to the answers for my research questions.

I found that all five identified categories developing concurrently in the chats. That is to say that there none of the categories or issues were superior to any other.

Having said that, I found that the most interesting to me, and the most important, I believe, is that of the protocol or rules that developed for the process of the online chat. Just as we follow rules in interacting in face-to-face groups, I found that during the chat there were many comments related to the flow of the discussion and rules or guidelines related to interaction. Among the comments made during the chat were those that indicated that the participants felt the need for a protocol or rules to be developed in order to proceed efficiently towards completing the task at hand and also, I think, out of a desire to be sure that all viewpoints were heard.

Very often in the first chat, participants expressed their frustration with comments such as, “This is confusing” and “I can’t keep up”. The latter comment is related to the speed with which the text scrolled over the screen on the computer. It was apparent that, once participants made it known that they were falling behind or were confused with the chat process, attempts were made to institute some structure to the system.

One of the first things that I noticed about the development of chat ‘rules’ with the large group was that it soon came to pass that participants soon began using names in their responses. Unlike a face-to-face chat, where body position and eye contact are the cues to indicate the person to whom you are talking, in the chat it is necessary to use other cues. The easiest method is to use the person’s name. While this might seem an obvious and simple protocol to develop, I think it is nonetheless critical in organizing chats. It is also interesting to note that no one person in the group suggested this. It is something that evolved during the course of the chat.

The second category or category that I identified was that of etiquette. It is certainly true that in an online chat environment where there are no visual cues, participants must rely on other means for indicating things that might be taken for granted in a face-to-face situation. This lack of visual presence seems to cause some interesting results in the online chat. First of all, the nature of the chat dictates that the participants must read all of the comments rather than listen to them. On many occasions the participants stated that they were unable to keep up with the chat and had to scroll through the window in order to keep up. This certainly would have a detrimental effect on the progress of the chat and would tend to increase the frustration level of the participants. When we chat face-to-face we have a number of strategies to assist us in communicating effectively with one another. In an online environment, we are left to devise our own strategies.

Another byproduct of this was that the participants were not always able to tell who was speaking to whom. Several of them were forced to inquire at various times as to who was speaking and who was being asked a question. In interviews and e-mail conversations, participants reported that they felt that “they were all talking about different things”. Another student complained about the difficulty that they seemed to have in staying on the subject at hand. Vicky summed up the views of many of the participants in an e-mail when she wrote, “people tend to get off topic a lot”.

One interesting observation made by Laurie after a particularly long comment she made in the chat was, “sorry, that was a lot of me”. I smiled when I read this for a couple of reasons. First of all, unlike a face-to-face environment, the text-based chat allows (forces?) you to see all that you have just ‘said’ to the group. Laurie seemed to be reacting to the fact that she paused and had the opportunity to look back at what she had written and seemed a little embarrassed that she dominated the conversation for a few minutes.

The other reason I enjoyed seeing that comment is that it speaks to the fact that Laurie, and perhaps others in the group, recognizes that there is an etiquette and that she had somehow breached that etiquette by talking as much as she did.

Another category that I saw emerging from the data that I had collected was one that I called comfort. Comfort, to me, indicated how easy the students found the technology to work with, how adept they were in utilizing the tools of the chat, and, generally, how at ease they felt in using the chats. It is surprising to me, in a way, that almost every participant wrote in their reflections that the chat was easier and more fun than they expected. Jeff wrote that, “it was a lot of fun” and that he “thought it was going to be worse than it was”. During her interview, Susanna stated that she felt it was “fairly easy to use the chat”. In comparing these comments, as well as others related to comfort level, it seems to me that much of the reason for this feeling of comfort might stem from the fact that the participants expected the chat to be a worse or less enjoyable experience than it was. Another student, Jennifer, stated in her e-mail reflection that the chat was, “more entertaining than I had expected”. It is curious to see the number of students who expressed that they harbored negative preconceptions about the chat experience. It is fairly understandable that the comfort level of the participants might be higher if they had bad feelings about it before they began. Apparently the experience was not that bad in comparison. It would be interesting in future studies to try to find out why people might have those negative preconceptions.

I also discovered that there was another issue related to the comfort level of the participants. From e-mail reflections, observations, and interview transcripts, it is apparent that the comfort level rises when a student is participating in the chat with someone that they know from class or elsewhere. Susanna expressed shyness about participating at first, but then became more comfortable, or at least, less inhibited by the third chat. She stated in her interview, “I

think that it does help the comfort level to know somebody else in there”.

A category that did not initially jump out at me was interaction. I think this was a matter of not seeing the forest for the trees. The entire chat experience is interaction and I didn't immediately think to define that as a category worth looking at. I became aware, however, as I read over the transcripts and e-mails again and again, that this was a viable category - and one that is related to the last category here, participation.

I differentiate between these two categories in that I define interaction as having to do with facets of one student dealing with actual interactions with one or more students in the chat. This might be a question-answer interaction, or trading comments, etc. Participation, on the other hand speaks to the degree to which the student offers comments during the chat - regardless of the interactions their comments might elicit.

In terms of interaction, I found that the chats went smoothly for the most part. Indeed, it was interesting to see just how smoothly they went, especially considering that this was the first chat experience for most of the participants. There was give and take, etiquette and protocol (discussed elsewhere) and generally a good grasp on the topic at hand. However, there were times during the chats when the conversation tended, as many conversations do, to drift from the topic at hand and into off-topic areas. During the first chat, it was observed that the final 10-15 minutes of the chat were, for all intents and purposes, a private chat between those students in one particular cohort (and thus, all familiar to one another). This was looked on negatively by those who were 'outside' this conversation and positively by those within the smaller subgroup. Of those that were not a part of the clique that was off-topic, Susanna, in her interview states, “it kinda put you on the outside cause you didn't get what they were talking about”. Shelly expressed dismay at the off-topic comments saying, “I like to be able to give and receive quick responses”. While, of those who were a part of the more private conversation, the comments

were more positive about chats in general. Jeff mentions in his e-mail, “people got their point across”. Laurie was happy because during the chats, “personalities could come through”. It is interesting to observe those who are off topic in the conversation came away with a better attitude about the chats than those who were ‘outside’ the loop.

Finally, participation was a category that I wanted to include. As stated earlier in this paper, participation simply refers to studying the degree to which the students participated and the reasons why students either did, or did not comment during the chats. It is obvious that, during classroom discussions, there are those students who participate quite actively in conversations and discussions while others do not participate to the same degree. The same seems to hold true for virtual chats as well, although the reasons may not always be the same.

Shelly reported in her e-mailed reflection to me that she, “had difficulty keeping up when so many people were talking at the same time”. This tended to inhibit some people from joining in the conversation as much as they might have.

It is interesting that Jennifer, in her e-mail, summed up her feelings on participating this way: “I did find it hard to be completely honest in some ways, this is the same way I feel in class. I really want to stretch my brain, learn something new, and be forced to reconsider my own perspective on things”.

Discussion

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of things that I wish I had known or thought about during the course of this study. In reading over the transcripts of the chats, I discovered that there were references to things that I was unfamiliar with and were confusing to me. I soon realized that what I was missing was the whiteboard feature of the chat room. The Virtual Classroom area of BlackBoard

provides the participants with a shared “whiteboard” on which they can draw and type messages. In collecting data during the first chat, I neglected to take note of the types of things that were drawn or written on this shared board. This is unfortunate because this white board approximates a real white board in a classroom which could be used *while* the members of the class were chatting. It was found to be a good area on which one of the participants - a moderator, perhaps - could take notes on the discussion and give ‘announcements’ to the group without interrupting the flow of conversation or risk having the message lost in the rest of the chat. Not until I was reviewing the transcript of the chat did it occur to me that it would be informative to make note of the text, and even the drawings, that were included on the whiteboard.

Time and proximity prevented me from interviewing more subjects and I think that that severely limits the degree to which we can use the findings that I have outlined. I have plenty of information about “what” happened, but not as much as I think I should about “why” it happened. I think more interview or reflective data from the participants would have aided the study immensely.

If I had the opportunity to begin the process again, I believe that I would have been more proactive in the creation of the large online discussion group. Inasmuch as I am investigating the participants’ experiences with chatting in a large discussion group,

During the course of analyzing the data, it became apparent that many (if not all) of the participants seemed to have brought preconceived notions about how they would react to a virtual chat. Typically, these were negative conceptions. I think that, given more time, it would be interesting to go back to discover what those preconceptions were and how they were generated.

Reflections

The experience of doing this study has certainly been a valuable one for me. I think the tendency we have is towards the empirical and statistically verifiable result and thus we are brought up unaccustomed to the skills and processes of doing a qualitative study. My experiences are further enhanced (confused) from the fact that this semester I conducted a parallel quantitative study for another class. It was interesting and sometimes quite disconcerting to have to switch hats during the day/week and compare the two processes. I began to find, by the end of the semester, that I was less and less able to keep the two distinct. I found that I wished to introduce more numerical data into the qualitative report, while at the same time, conduct interviews for the quantitative version.

The qualitative report was much more difficult to write than I had anticipated. Like many, I tend to put off work until the last moment and this hampered me in many respects - particularly in the interview transcriptions. I know that part of my learning for this semester includes and new realization that I will not be able to procrastinate during the dissertation next year!

I will continue to study this facet of online learning. I believe strongly that, if we are to incorporate online technologies for teaching and learning, then we have an obligation to the students to create a model for online learning that supports creativity, interaction, and discovery in the learning process. A study such as this might be seen as only a first step in the design process. I have identified a number of categories of online discussion that may or may not have an effect on the efficacy of this medium. It is for others to continue and to take those categories and create meaning and viable models for online interaction. Otherwise, I'm afraid that this medium, which I believe holds so much potential, might be doomed from the start to failure.