

TA Tip: Making the most out of the chat box

Introduction

For instructors of synchronous online courses, managing the chat box can be a source of distraction and frustration. Yet in my experience, students perceived the chat box in a far more positive light. During the Fall 2020 semester, I experienced synchronous virtual learning from a unique, liminal perspective as an undergraduate teaching assistant (TA) of an introductory animal science course. The teaching team for this class was made up of a professor, graduate teaching assistant, and three undergraduate teaching assistants. The majority of our lab instruction was done synchronously online. We used a simple structure for each lab: a brief introductory lecture followed by breakout and whole group discussion. In the breakout groups, students worked on case studies related to the lab topic. Following the breakout groups, members of each group contributed to a group discussion at the end of the lab. Through my experiences with virtual learning as both a peer and instructor I identified three ways instructors can utilize the chat box to improve engagement during synchronous classes:

1. To encourage inclusivity and participation
2. To facilitate social connectedness between students, TAs, and instructors
3. To co-organize course activities with students

Methods

In addition to sharing my personal observations, this Teaching Tip includes the results of a brief group survey I conducted during the final lab of the semester. Students were randomly assigned to breakout groups and completed the survey as a group. One survey was submitted per group. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board, protocol #2020-0032. Of 80 total students, 73 participated in the group survey activity (response rate = 91%).

Results

Encouraging inclusivity and participation

During face-to-face instruction, students who had questions or additions to the conversation quietly raised their hand to signal to the instructor that they had a question. This allowed the instructor to address the student when it was suitable for the conversation. While some platforms offer a “raise hand” feature that can be used effectively, instructors can use the chat box in tandem with the raise hand feature to stimulate class conversations without interrupting the flow of the speaker or creating technical issues.

One benefit of the chat box is that student questions can be addressed when appropriate in the conversation. The chat box also allows other students to consider follow up questions in advance. For many students, the chat box lowers the barrier to participation. Students in our class said the chat box allowed them to ask questions without feeling uncomfortable. It also allows students with connectivity or environment issues to participate at the same level as their classmates. Our course discussions also benefited from the increased participation— students could ask specific questions while a topic was being discussed and have the question answered by the lecturer without taking time away from the class.

Facilitating social connectedness between students, TAs, and instructors

The chat box can be critical to facilitating informal interactions that lead to social connectedness among students, TAs, and instructors. Most students and instructors in our course were new to virtual interaction and may lack experience facilitating the unscripted interactions that bring together a class. Based on group survey responses, 57% of our class said that the whole group chat box discussion helped them connect with the instructors and TAs. On the rare occasion that we had an in-person class this semester, the students I recognized from the chat box were the first ones to approach me during lab. During synchronous video-conferenced classes, the chat box provides another means for instructors to connect with students in addition to speaking through the camera and microphone. Offering students multiple ways to express themselves will ensure everyone has an opportunity to connect with their peers and instructors.

Co-organizing course activities with students

Connecting with students through chat box contributed to the development of a collaborative learning environment. We used the chat box to engage students and hold their attention throughout the three-hour class period. We found that student discussion in the chat often led to verbal discussion about industry applications of class subjects that allowed students to share their experiences. We also used the chat box to collect informal feedback during class periods. Students knew their voice would be heard if their group needed more time, clarification on instructions, or just had something interesting to contribute.

When implementing this in any type of classroom, instructors need to set guidelines for chat box etiquette during the first few classes. It is helpful for students to understand how and why they should use the chat. We recommend allowing student discussion around the class content while only addressing specific questions verbally. While the chat is intended to be an informal communication, instructors need to model this behavior. In class settings with multiple instructors, those who are not speaking can address chat questions and share resources when appropriate. While the chat box may seem like an insignificant part of synchronous classes, 21% of our group survey respondents said the chat box is where they learned the most.

Conclusions

From both a student and instructor perspective, I believe the chat box is widely underutilized. The chat box can be used in synchronous classes to foster educational discussion and develop

the connection between student and instructor. Importantly, instructors can encourage student discussion and address specific questions that arise as a result.

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