

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 perceive 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 is typically a made up of a professor, graduate teaching assistant, and multiple 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 break out 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. The response rate was 91%.

Results

Encouraging inclusivity and participation

During face-to-face instruction, students who have questions or additions to the conversation can quietly raise their hand to signal to the instructor they have a question. This allows the instructor to address the student when it is suitable for the conversation. While some platforms offer a “raise hand” feature with good intention, there are several steps that need to happen before the question can be addressed.

The same question asked in chat can be addressed when appropriate in the conversation and allows other students to consider follow up questions in advance. For many students, the chat box lowers the barrier for 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 students also benefited from the increased response rate – they could ask specific questions while a topic was being discussed and have the question answered by the lecturer without taking time away 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. Many students and instructors alike are new to virtual interaction. The unscripted interactions that bring a class together are rare. 57% of our class respondents said that the whole group chat box discussion most 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. For some, the chat box might not provide the same level of connection as a 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 contributes 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 lead 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, it is important for the instructors 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 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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