



Using 'chat' in the classroom



Note: Although the term 'chat' is probably not appropriate in an educational context we use the term here for ease of reference.

Introduction

Chat rooms have become one of the fastest-growing segments of the Internet. In part this is because many young people find them a great, fun, interactive playground in which to make new friends, 'chat' simultaneously to a whole group of other users, or 'chat' to just one individual.

However, there are increasing concerns over children's unsupervised use of chat rooms. Apart from the potential danger of young people becoming addicted to chat rooms, the real danger is of young people being in touch with someone who might wish to cultivate a relationship with them in order to contact them offline.

When children are in a 'chat' area they are in a very public place. They do not necessarily know the true identity of anyone they are talking to in the chat room. Those who would wish to harm children can prey on those in chat rooms who appear to be left out or lonely. They can pretend to be supportive and sympathetic in order to gain the trust of the young person by being willing to 'listen' to their problems and provide friendship.

There are dangers associated with chat rooms but the benefits far outweigh the potential dangers. However, it is vital that teachers take sensible precautions before incorporating 'chat' into an educational environment.

Technical Information from Childnet International

Most 'chat' is text based, where conversation is typed like e-mail bouncing back and forward between a group and appearing immediately on the screen. However, increasingly audio based 'chat' is being offered - this requires the computer to have a microphone and speakers.

There are two types of 'chat' services, Internet Relay Chat, (or IRC for short) and individual web page chat rooms.

IRC is the most popular 'chat' service, but in order to use this you must download special software to your computer. One of the most popular pieces of software is called mIRC (<http://www.mirc.co.uk/>).

However, IRC is not something that you should just dive into without first doing your homework. You could feel very lost if you do not know the basic rules. Just like CB radio, IRC has its own dialect. One of the best online guides to how IRC works can be found on the mIRC web site <http://www.mirc.co.uk/irc.html>.

'Chat' is also available on individual web pages. This is popular because they are so easy to use although not as instant. You don't need to download special software to participate in web-based 'chat'.

Whilst most chat rooms - available from individual commercial portals or through downloading IRC software - are mainly entertainment-based and may have little or no educational value, there are a number of educational web sites beginning to offer 'chat' facilities. If you are interested in using 'chat', we recommend that before you start you need to make sure that you and other staff understand how 'chat' works.

Whilst many pupils may be proficient typists, they will need to think fast and type quickly to use chat rooms effectively and keep up with the conversation.

The UK based charity, Childnet International, offers important advice on its web site <http://www.chatdanger.com> and has developed a simple safety mnemonic which gives the key safety tips in using chat rooms:



**C****Careful**

people online may not be who they say they are.

H**Hang on to your personal information**

never give out your e-mail or home address, phone number, or where you go to school.

A**Arranging to meet is dangerous**

never meet someone offline unless you are sure who they are, and then only in a public place, with a parent/carer.

T**Tell your friends**

or an adult if you come across something that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Guidelines and what to look for

- Children should only be given access to educational chat rooms. The use of 'chat' in an educational context should always be supervised and pupils should be taught to understand the importance of safety within any chat room.
- Teachers should familiarise themselves with any chat room being used to ensure that it offers a genuine educational experience and to familiarise themselves with how it works.
- Children should only use moderated chat rooms. The moderator (or referee) checks what users are saying and ensures that the rules of the chat room (no bad language, propositions, or other inappropriate behaviour) are observed. If those users who break the rules of the room are not thrown out, or warned publicly, the moderator is not online or is ineffective.
- Check how the chat room is moderated and whether this is done by a teacher, or recognised, identifiable and approved adult. Some sites use software programmes in addition to human moderation, to screen the incoming text. If software is used, check which keywords are screened for, for example any expletives, or words such as 'sex', 'meet' or 'secret'.
- A good chat room should have a very clear Terms and Conditions and Privacy Statement which should be upheld and enforced. It should remind users of the dangers and display prominent safety tips.
- Find out if anyone can join the chat room. Is there a clear differentiation of age groups? How does the chat room verify passwords and users?
- Children should be taught that they should never arrange to meet someone they have met in a chat room, unless they are accompanied by an adult.
- A good educational chat room should publish advance notice of topics and questions being discussed. The chat room should ensure that a 'host' oversees the 'chat' and leads the 'chat' just as a teacher does in a classroom. (Sometimes this host will also serve as the moderator).
- Some popular chat rooms have advertising and links to other sites and services. It is therefore vital that you check who runs the chat room and whether there is a clear educational objective for the service. Some chat rooms include an archive of earlier 'chat' sessions. This can be a helpful resource when assessing the value of pupils taking part in future sessions.
- For chat rooms to be used most effectively within an educational context, it is vital that students have genuine opportunities to express their views, to learn from one another and to initiate new 'chat' sessions.
- Pupils should be taught the social/writing conventions needed when conversing in a chat room. For example, never give out their name or any other personal details or information, be aware that anything they say in an e-mail can reflect on the school. Schools should include disclaimers at the end of every e-mail.
- Teachers should stress to parents the importance of following the above guidelines in the home, as well as in the school.

Examples of educational 'chat' rooms

Where links are provided to other sites, Becta is not responsible for the contents or reliability of these web sites and does not necessarily endorse the views expressed within them. Listing should not be taken as endorsement of any kind. Although these links are checked on a regular basis, we cannot guarantee that they will work all of the time and we have no control over the availability of the linked pages.

A number of schools and educational web sites are using 'chat' constructively, and through well-structured, moderated sessions children can benefit from using 'chat' as it provides an excellent medium to discuss issues with other children (especially from other countries) about a common interest.

Children can grow in confidence as they express their views concisely and on the spot.

Examples where 'chat' is being used constructively include:

GridClub

GridClub (<http://www.gridclub.com/>) was launched this year by Michael Wills MP, Minister for Learning and Technology and is aimed at 7-11 year old children to support their learning at home and at school. The web site provides a safe and fun learning environment and schools need to register for students to take part.

GridClub offers a range of professionally mediated clubs coupled with a Virtual Library of interactive resources that relate to the National Curriculum at Key Stage 2. GridClub links directly into the National Grid for Learning and combines online facilities with a series of television programmes and a host of other materials.

GridClub comprises of four elements:

The Club

This is a safe online community based on Oracles think.com technology, with educational professionals on hand to mediate and encourage participation.

The Virtual Library

The content of the Virtual Library is continuously monitored and evaluated to ensure that the content is suitable, relevant and up to date keeping the site interesting and safe for children.

The Shop

The GridClub Shop is open to GridClub members and the wider public. It is designed to offer supplementary products and services that will encourage parents and teachers to support children's online learning.

The TV Series - What If?

In September 2001 a TV series supporting GridClub called What If? will be launched on Channel 4.

You can find out more about GridClub at:

<http://www.gridclub.com>

Other examples of educational 'chat' rooms include:

Animal Diaries (<http://www.tesan.vuurwerk.nl/diaries/>)

Animal Diaries is an international web site which uses 'chat' to link children in different schools with famous authors of children's stories. Previous transcripts of 'chat' sessions with the authors are included on the site.

ENO (<http://eno2000.joensuu.fi/html/default.html>)

ENO (Environment Online) is an international web site which aims to be a global virtual school for environmental awareness. Around 50 schools, from around the world have joined the network and are active in studying the environment both locally and globally. The site has a carefully planned and moderated 'chat' timetable with earlier 'chat' sessions archived.

