Let's Chat: Chat Rooms in the Elementary School

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ABSTRACT
This article takes a look at my individual experience with using chat rooms as part of the instruction for computers in an elementary school setting. It also points out the suggested curriculum guidelines as established by NETS in regards to student communication. In this article, you will also find strategies I have used in my classroom to expose students to the potential of using chat rooms. For schools to advance technologically, where they are capable, personnel must be willing to strive to expose students to the wealth of resources and expertise that is available to them.

Keywords
Chat rooms, Collaborative projects, Internet, Peer interaction

Imagine the Possibilities

Expanding a student’s perception of the world around them is part of what I consider to be a teacher’s job. Because of the growth of the Internet, technology now enables students to learn in ways that were not previously possible. School is no longer confined to a small classroom within a building. Students now have access to experts in different fields and have the opportunities of collaboration with students from other parts of the world through the Internet, email and chat rooms.

In my classroom, I try to give each of my students a taste of what resources are available to them. Not only have we learned to access information from CDs but how to find vital information on the Internet and sharing what we have learned with other students of similar age from around the world. In the past, students have participated in keypals projects, Quests and a variety of other beneficial learning opportunities. This year, we are going to expand our learning curve with even more technology-based lessons involving primarily chat rooms.

The National Educational Technology Standards for Students (NETS) states that students should “use telecommunications to collaborate, publish, and interact with peers, experts and other audiences (International Society for Technology in Education, 2000). I felt that one of the best ways to meet these criteria was through chat rooms. I first learned about using chat rooms when working on my Master’s Degree in Educational Technology through Pepperdine University. This degree was accomplished by using chat rooms and the Internet extensively for 90% of the course. Through first hand experience I was able to see how professors/teachers could effectively use a chat room to facilitate discussions between students and even bring in guest “speakers”.

The Timeless Conflict of Good vs. Bad

There are pros and cons to this method of communication in a school environment. Occasionally we have had students type inappropriate words and unfortunately that cannot be corrected before others read it as in other types of online communication. However, I feel that the pros outweigh the negative in this situation. The fact that students can communicate with students of similar age with minimal time lag allows for opportunities of collaboration. I feel that this will also open up additional courses to those in rural communities with little options for electives due to staff constraints. By having students and parents sign some sort of an Acceptable Use Policy before any internet activity, whether for research or chat rooms begins, schools will lessen the threat of improper use and will have a set precedent for discipline should improper use occur.

What Is Available?

It has been my experience thus far, in public education, that most educators are not particularly afraid of using chat rooms in school, much less an elementary school, but are just not yet comfortable with the idea. There are
lots of chat rooms available on the internet, however, teachers need to be careful and choose those that are safe for students and are not accompanied by profanity and the various other pitfalls that sometimes seem to plague the internet. The chat rooms I have used in the past have been mIRC (used for the ReadIn (www.readin.org) which invites authors to answer questions from students on a given date and time) and TappedIn (www.tappedin.sri.com), a chat room designed for educational professionals. As I began this year, I looked to see if there were chat rooms designed with education in mind. One chat room that I found and will be using for the remainder of the school year is located within a web site called epals (www.epals.com). Epals allows you to create private chat rooms and in this manner gives control to the creator in regards to who can participate and who cannot all by having a password protected chat room.

Generating Motivation

This type of technology, rarely used in classrooms, is creating a new method of motivation for students. I have seen the excitement in children’s faces when they see they can actually “talk” over a computer to another student either across the room or across the country. Anytime students use a chat room, it is important to allow them a few practice sessions before chatting with another classroom, if time allows. This does several things. First it alleviates some of the intimidation of everyone seeing what the student types and second, they have the chance to see how the chat room works. Also, although spelling is extremely important, due to the time restraints my classes have, I also stress that sometimes they may have to spell things the best they can as long as it is understandable.

Infuse Into the Curriculum

I begin introducing chat rooms to my first grade students where they just visit with their classmates. The students are allowed to talk about anything and the only rules are that there can’t be any bad language or rudeness and there must not be any talking out loud, which makes it fun for the kids. During the second semester of school for the second grade classes, I find other classes, preferably from other states, for students to interact with. Through this communication students generally find out about each other’s classrooms, states, and common interests. Another aspect of this activity could be to send a photograph of each class to the opposite teacher for students to have a visual image of their partner classroom. This can then be turned into a classroom project by having students create stories or slide shows over what they learned about their corresponding classroom.

As the students progress, so does their involvement using chat rooms. I have found that third and fourth grade students thoroughly enjoy trying to work on collaborative projects with students in other towns. It has been beneficial to have some of the classes work with younger age levels and to share their “expertise” in certain areas. In the same aspect, students of similar age have worked on a quest from Classroom Connect and debated on actions taken by the quest crew. This year I face a new challenge as I have one grade level develop their own quest based on the history of our county.

Accept the Future

We are told that technology is the future for schools. Projects designed for students can be as broad as the teacher and the student’s imagination. As new technologies emerge we as educators need to accept the new ideas and rather than be afraid, begin by taking small steps. We must continue to safeguard students but at the same time not inhibit them from learning. By introducing them to new ideas and possibilities, we expand their minds and in some cases attitudes toward learning. I feel that I have honestly done this by creating a classroom where students enjoy the learning and find that other elementary students are involved in the same atmosphere.

References