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6. Chat and Instant Messaging Systems

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Article abstract

Text-based conferencing can be both asynchronous (i.e., participants log into the conference at separate times), and synchronous (i.e., interaction takes place in real time). It is thus subject to the same wide variation as the online audio- and video-conferencing methods (see the earlier Reports in this series). Synchronous text-based approaches (e.g., online chat groups and instant messaging systems) are highly popular among online users generally owing to their ability to bring together special-interest groups from around the world without cost. In distance education (DE), however, synchronous chat methods are less widely used, owing in part to the problems of arranging for working adults in different time zones to join a discussion group simultaneously. Instant text messaging is more popular among DE users in view of the choice it provides between responding to a message immediately (synchronous communication) or after a delay (asynchronous). The different synchronous and asynchronous approaches are likely to become more widely used in parallel with one another, as they are integrated in individual product packages.

The following comparison stresses the chat and instant messaging features of six integrated conferencing products.

Technical Evaluations Report

6. Chat and Instant Messaging Systems

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Abstract

Text-based conferencing can be both asynchronous (i.e., participants log into the conference at separate times), and synchronous (i.e., interaction takes place in real time). It is thus subject to the same wide variation as the online audio- and video-conferencing methods (see the earlier Reports in this series). Synchronous text-based approaches (e.g., online chat groups and instant messaging systems) are highly popular among online users generally owing to their ability to bring together special-interest groups from around the world without cost. In distance education (DE), however, synchronous chat methods are less widely used, owing in part to the problems of arranging for working adults in different time zones to join a discussion group simultaneously. Instant text messaging is more popular among DE users in view of the choice it provides between responding to a message immediately (synchronous communication) or after a delay (asynchronous). The different synchronous and asynchronous approaches are likely to become more widely used in parallel with one another, as they are integrated in individual product packages.

The following comparison stresses the chat and instant messaging features of six integrated conferencing products.

Trials of Free Products

1. ***AOL Messenger*** provides a full set of chat and instant messaging features, with numerous options for customizing the log-in settings and look-and-feel, chat, privacy of groups, alerts, and file transfer (without virus checker). As with *Yahoo Messenger*, multiple persons can chat through the "buddies list," which allows audio communication. More options are available in the audio feature (mute, pause, disconnect, meters, hands-free) than with *Yahoo Messenger,* though the clarity is similar. Text messages can be archived by copying and pasting from the chat window only. Webcam integration is not available. *AOL Messenger* is popular with the general online public, and is well supported. It would be an appropriate choice for a DE student, even though it lacks a few of the features found in other products.

2. ***Excite.*** In addition to the chat function, this service provides a valuable "web tour" or feature (allowing participants to control other users' browsers in leading them to a series of web addresses: i.e., "co-browsing"). *Excite* is generally easy to use, provides a standard text area for messages, and features audio communication. Otherwise, the product does not include enough of the other basic features important to DE students for it to be recommended as an appropriate chat tool for DE class work. It contains limited start-up options and minimal means of controlling

simultaneous users. Participants can send and receive files during a session, but cannot archive the text chats.

3. **MSN Messenger** provides some basic chat features, and features audio communication. It is generally easy to use and provides a standard text area for messages. Otherwise, it features too few of the capabilities that are important to educational users for its chat tools to be recommended for DE class work. It contains limited start-up options and minimal user control of participants. Users cannot send and receive files nor archive chats.

4. **Sonork** is designed for use by work-groups on an intranet, but is easily adaptable to the Internet. It provides a basic set of chat features, a range of login status options, and the ability to track the use of multiple chat rooms. It includes features that might be valuable for general users (e.g., a calendar and 'to do' reminders), but it does not include many of the useful DE features such as audio and archiving. Installation is more cumbersome than with other instant messaging tools. *Sonork* is easy to use once installed but its chat area is cumbersome and may be difficult for new users to master.

5. **Tourbar.** [At time of publication, this product appears to be no longer available. We have retained our evaluation of it in this report, however, owing to the unique potential of "co-browsing" in DE (see Excite above), and as a reminder to identify an alternative product.] *Tourbar* was a specialty "co-browsing" tool – potentially valuable for DE students and instructors wishing to lead each other on web site "excursions." The user was able to program solo "web tours," group tours, or become a tour guide ('Master Surfer'). A chat window was available for use in conjunction with a web tour or separately. *Tourbar* did not have enough features to be recommended as a primary chat or instant messaging tool.

6. **Yahoo Messenger.** As with *AOL Messenger*, this service provides a full set of chat/ instant messaging features, with numerous options for customising the start-up and login appearances (more than with AOL). It features chat privacy, file transfer, and alerts. Multiple users can chat through the conferencing feature; and a range of capabilities is included for inviting, controlling, and blocking chat participants. Other features useful to DE students include file transfer (with virus checker), archiving, and webcam integration. A basic audio feature is included, although its only variable setting is a hands-free mode. *Yahoo Messenger* is the only tool reviewed in this category to date with a built-in archiving feature (optional setting). This tool would be an appropriate choice for DE students.

Conclusions

The chat/instant messaging products with the highest ratings in our comparisons to date are *AOL Messenger* and *Yahoo Messenger*. Each has a wide range of features, while *Yahoo Messenger* has a possible advantage in terms of the number of features. As the synchronous and asynchronous functions of online conferencing methods merge within individual software packages, it becomes increasingly difficult to select the ideal product for specific DE functions. A product may have a good synchronous audio feature but a mediocre messaging facility – or vice versa. In addition, new products continually emerge, and old ones disappear. In selecting products as the standards for DE delivery, it is often preferable to identify good stand-alone applications that can be used in parallel with one another. This approach allows educators to replace individual products if needed, without causing serious inconvenience to students. Over time, it is likely that conferencing products with multiple integrated functions will become less popular, in the same

way as the integrated "tape-slide" machines of the 1970s fell out of favour because of their relative cumbersomeness and inconvenience.

The next report in this series will discuss software evaluation criteria and terminology.

N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses are changed, the online references cited in this report may be outdated. They can be checked at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: *cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/*. Italicised product names in this report can be assumed to be registered trademarks.

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