Assessing Student Work from Chatrooms and Bulletin Boards

John F. Bauer

The key to success in a distance-learning classroom is not which technologies are used but how they are used and what information is communicated using the technologies.

—Simonson (2000, p. 29)

With advances in Web-based technology, the on-line class has become a common option in higher education. Even professors who are not tech-savvy are using course management systems to click into the world of digital learning.

Launching the virtual class may be the easy part. An emergent problem is that assessing student work in the on-line learning medium poses new twists in traditional assessment methodology (see Chapter Two). This is particularly true when the professor is confronted with assessing student work that is posted in two common on-line forums: the chatroom and the bulletin board. Traditional notions of collecting and grading papers have little currency in these two fast-paced print mediums, where student work is often submitted daily.

Professors can take some comfort in the fact that a numerical grading guideline (that is, a rubric) has the potential to work just as well for the chatroom and bulletin board of the on-line class as it does in the four-walled classroom. If using a rubric makes sense to professors, three options are available for creating grading criteria: they can write their own, seek advice and consent from their students, as some have suggested (Anderson, 1998), or use a rubric with preestablished guidelines as found in the literature. This chapter offers a broad view of why chatrooms and bulletin boards are popular with professors and suggests the use of rubrics for making logical and
just assessments of student postings in the chatroom and bulletin board. (Exhibit 3.1 provides a selected list of the technical and casual jargon associated with chatrooms and bulletin boards.)

**The Chatroom and Assessment**

The technology for the professor’s Web site is derived from commercial Internet sites that have had patrons chatting away on various topics for years. In the academic arena, the chatroom allows the entire class, or simply two or more members, to meet on-line at the same time and have a lively text-generated conversation. In this sense, it is the on-line environment that comes closest to simulating a regular class meeting. The chatroom allows for brainstorming sessions, discussions of hot topics, team planning, and question-and-answer forums (McCampbell, 2000). Berzsenyi (2000) notes also that chatrooms allow professors to engage the greatest number
of students in discussion at the same time, involve students in collaborative work, and get them engaged in writing for real audiences. Moreover, students are able to share in the teaching as well as the learning in the chat environment.

Grading class participation can have a positive effect on the ability of students to demonstrate growth in critical thinking, active learning, and their ability to develop skills in active discourse (Bean and Peterson, 1998). It follows that the professor who values student participation in face-to-face classroom discussions to the extent that such participation is scored by a grade will also want a measurement strategy for chatroom discussions. Exhibit 3.2 provides a suggested numerical grading guideline (rubric) for assessing participation in the chatroom. In an on-line class, professors who place little or no value on participation in chat run the risk of talking to themselves. Students in a regular class can often be nudged into contributing to a discussion, but there is no prodding a student who has not logged into the chatroom. An additional feature of the chatroom that makes reviewing student participation possible is that sessions are automatically saved, or archived, for easy review.

Slow typists are at a disadvantage when participation is assessed. Typing ability and speed have a great influence on chat participation, and the more accurately a person can type influences the perceived credibility of the contribution (Harmon and Jones, 1999).

Many professors may be satisfied with the general nature of assessing simple participation in chat. Others might want to emphasize to students that logging into the chatroom and participating in the conversation is an important step, but a consistent quality of contributions is the substance of a valuable discussion. These professors may have had the experience of witnessing a chatroom that becomes an unfocused free-for-all, somewhat like a class before the professor walks in.
To preempt an unruly chat, consider posting a rubric that looks something like the one shown in Exhibit 3.3. Note that precise language and typing skills are not listed as premiums to high scoring unless they interfere with coherence.

### The Bulletin Board and Assessment

Every course Web site contains a forum, a place where class members can post messages. Controlled by the professor, the forum provides topics and comments that call for student responses. Once the professor has opened a forum and provided a thread for discussion, the students can type their contributions into a special response window located on a separate Web page. When the comments are written the way they are intended, the student clicks the Submit button, automatically sending the contribution to the forum site for viewing by the whole class. The student either responds to a comment already posted or starts a new discussion thread by clicking the appropriate button.

The asynchronous nature of the bulletin board makes it a popular tool for on-line professors. Compared to the chatroom, it is much easier to facilitate and is not dependent on the clock. The professor can open the bulletin board for business at the beginning of class and leave it open until the end.

Although bulletin boards lack the immediacy of live communication, they allow a more directed and lasting flow of concepts, ideas, and opinions (McCampbell, 2000). Bolstered by research and the resulting use of direct quotations and citations, students can make impressive cases for their points of view. They can take their time to reflect, craft contributions thoughtfully, and pay strict attention to usage, grammar, and spelling. Nonnative speakers may feel more confident about posting on the bulletin board because they have more time to process their thoughts before submitting them (Khan, 1999).
Bulletin boards have other positive features:

- The bulletin board makes possible a reflective follow-up to chatroom topics.
- Postings allow for the use of attachments. Students working on group projects can complete their work on a separate word-processed file and send it along to the forum.
- Students can write on their own time. Without the pressure of a class to attend, they can work at meeting a posting deadline when it best suits them.
- Professors can check the bulletin boards as often or as infrequently as desired. As long as the Web site is open, there is a permanent record of postings. This is beneficial to both students and professor.

The assessment of student work on the bulletin board differs significantly from that in the chatroom. If the analogue to chat is the classroom discussion, the analogue to the bulletin board is the hard-copy essay. In this sense, postings can be set to the same criteria that the professor establishes for grading the essay.

Unlike the quick-thinking and quick-typing milieu of chat, all students have the time to produce their best work before submitting it for view on the bulletin board. Exhibit 3.4 suggests a rubric for assessing the content of student postings to the bulletin board.

**Exhibit 3.4. Rubric for Assessing Student Postings on the Bulletin Board**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Points</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9–10</td>
<td>Demonstrates excellence in grasping key concepts; critiques work of others; stimulates discussion; provides ample citations for support of opinions; readily offers new interpretations of discussion material. Ideas are expressed clearly, concisely; uses appropriate vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>Shows evidence of understanding most major concepts; will offer an occasional divergent viewpoint or challenge; shows some skill in support for opinions. Some signs of disorganization with expression; transition wording may be faulty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>Has mostly shallow grasp of the material; rarely takes a stand on issues; offers inadequate levels of support. Poor language use garbles much of the message; only an occasional idea surfaces clearly; expression seems disjointed; overuse of the simple sentence and a redundancy with words and commentary; paragraphs often appear unrelated to each other. This student requires constant prompting for contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>A minimal posting of material. Shows no significant understanding of material. Language is mostly incoherent. Does not respond readily to prompting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Adapted from Bauer and Anderson (2000).
Conclusion
As professors move in the direction of providing some course work on-line, they may be interested in using rubrics to assess students’ writing in chatrooms or for bulletin boards. Indeed, the primary means of communication between class members and professors in on-line courses are chatrooms and bulletin boards. This chapter offers a guide for professors seeking means to assess student contributions in these two important environments using rubrics that measure degrees of participation and content, or quality, of work submitted.

References


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