eChatBox – swapshop

(Harrogate IATEFL conference April 2006)
THE SCRIPT

(Slide one: synchronous text-communication)
10.46 Sheila Vine has just entered the chat room
>"Hello everyone!"
10.47 Valentina Dodge has just entered the chat room
> "Hi!"
(Slide two: synchronous audio+video communication :)
>Hello! I am Valentina. I'm very happy to be presenting this exchange mechanism here in Harrogate today. I work at the University of Naples and freelance for local companies in the Salerno area, in the south of Italy. I would like to thank IATEFL and the Learning Technology SIG for selecting me for the Travel Grant award. I am very grateful for this opportunity.
Well! Welcome to our swapshop and thank you for coming along this morning! As you will see this is all about sharing and bouncing ideas off each other…. Here is my co-presenter…
(Slide three: synchronous text and audio communication)
>"Sheila here. Valentina and I first met online and we have worked on this exchange without ever meeting... until yesterday….

Our IATEFL Harrogate swapshop presentation (held on the Learning Technologies Day Sunday 09 April 2006) had three key **blended** elements:

- the hybrid nature of the presentation itself
- the virtual nature of the preparation
- the mixed feedback options (face-to-face and electronic)

We met during an online e-moderation[1] course and the eChatBoX idea followed on from our parting gifts. It started out as a gift which created to help us continue developing together after the end of the course, a sort of empty shell intended to all those working in online synchronous situations to drop ideas into or to pull ideas out of.
We have been working on it ever since. The special feature we would like to share with readers about this swapshop was the preparation aspect, the virtual nature of working for 9 months together without ever meeting! We only came face-to-face a few hours before going live at Harrogate on the steps of the international conference centre!

It was with this hybrid format in mind that we prepared our slide show. PowerPoint presentations can be so dry at the best of times and we felt that to illustrate the possible combinations of real-time text-based, audio and video communication, we should hide in the audience and let our PowerPoint slides start the show for us! We think, for those present, the blended ideas became immediately apparent.

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[1] E-moderation course run by TheConsultants-E   http://www.theconsultants-e.com/courses/em/index.asp

Our Agenda

This is our Agenda

1. Welcome warm-up
2. Socialisation & Motivation
3. eChatBoX features
4. Let's try it
5. Wrap up

Sheila outlined some of the crucial socialisation and motivational factors that all practitioners involved in distance programmes should be aware of:

- the need to make socialisation activities integral to online courses
- aspects of virtual group formation
- tutor presence and strategies for embracing netiquette
- peer interaction

She explained how high drop-out rates are often caused by inadequate socialisation strategies and how online groups form, embrace norms or storm before they can perform. She ended this part of the swapshop by mentioning the "mourning" or closure stage and how **eChatBoX** had actually come about as a parting gift!
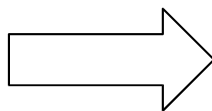
Valentina demonstrated the functionality of our exchange mechanism.

This dynamic bank of resources and activities can be accessed easily; it is hosted on a Moodle platform[2] in topic mode and uses Wiki[3] technology to allow fast contributions. It was created for teachers involved in real-time (i.e. synchronous online sessions) whether those chat room sessions are part of an online course, and add-on for face-to-face lessons or cultural exchanges with students in other countries. These chats can be either text or speech based.
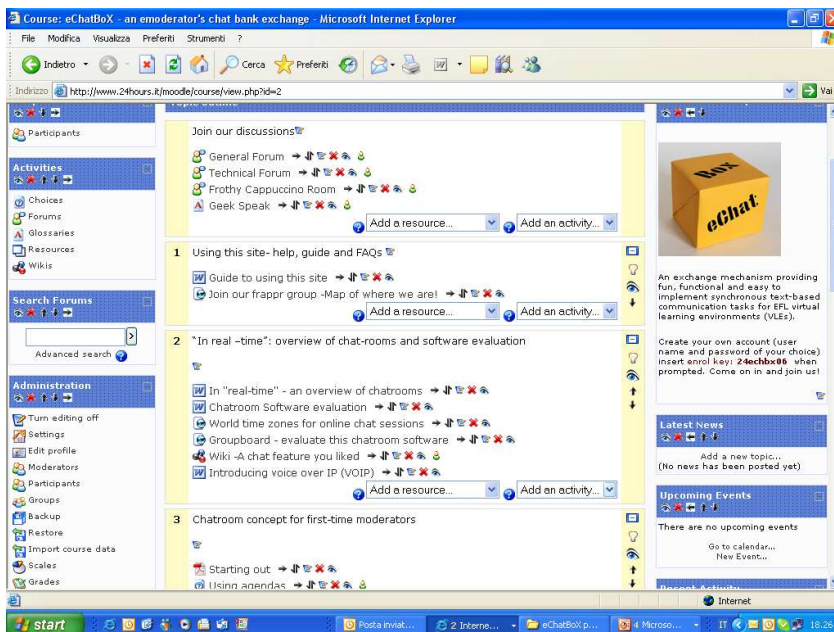

The ten topics to date are:

1. Guide to using this exchange mechanism
2. "In real –time": overview of chat-rooms and software evaluation
3. Chatroom concepts for first time moderators
4. Chat protocols
5. Chat starters
6. Chat tasks
7. Chat round-offs
8. A history of chats: our experiences and case studies
9. Chat moderation skills
10. Our ethos

Wikis are a way for us to work together collaboratively with no prior need to understand programming or HTML. Contributors do need to worry about formatting and if mistakes are made a history/back button means the previous version is easily retrieved.

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[2] Moodle is an Open Source Course Management System which can be downloaded and easily customized (www.moodle.org)
[3] Wikis are editable web pages which allow users to contribute, edit, or comment very simply.
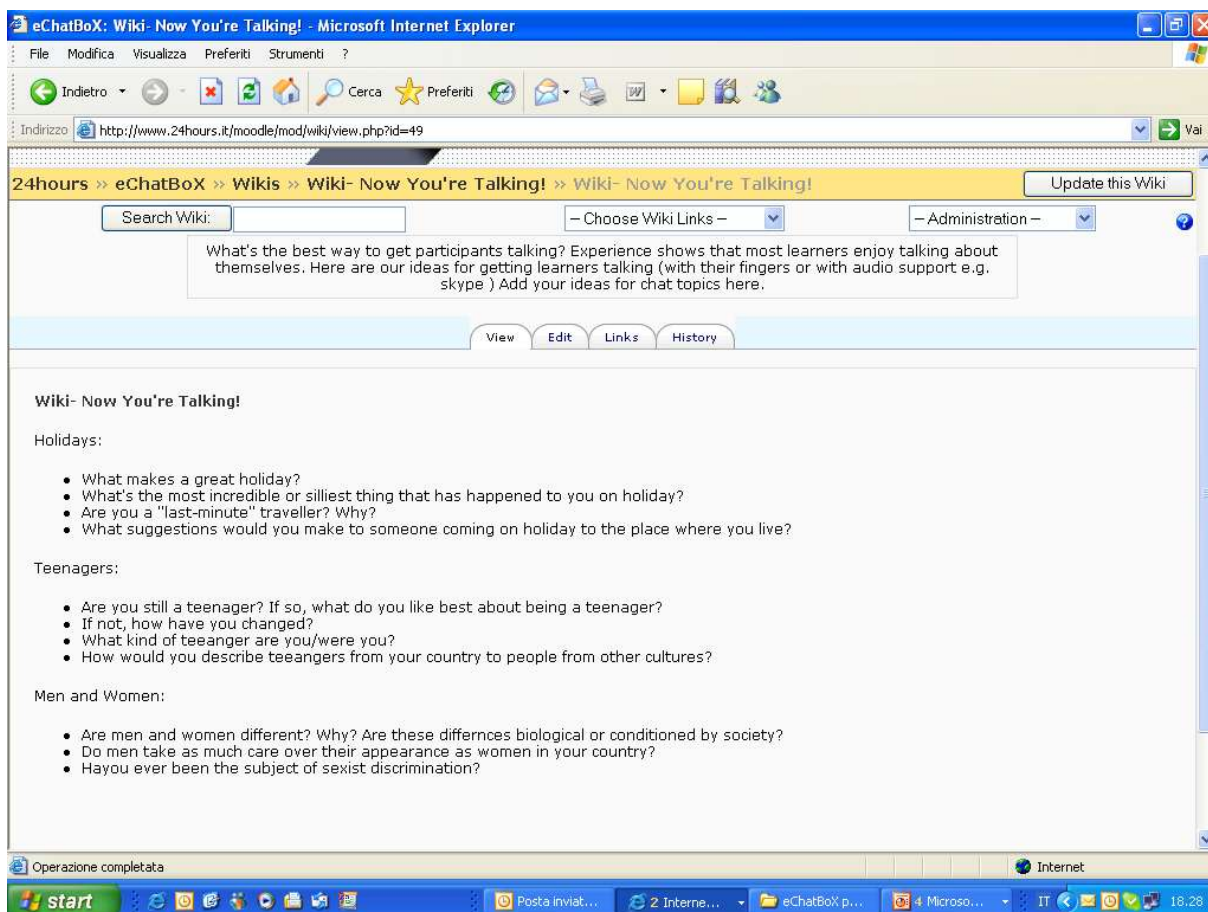
To add your contributions log onto the Moodle click on the relevant Wiki topic, for example, an idiom a day or our task bank and you can add your suggestions by typing them straight in.

This can be one word, one sentence or more detailed contributions of activities that have worked for your learners that you would like to share.

 Share alike

Our exchange uses a creative commons licence[4] meaning
You are free:
- to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work
- to make derivative works

You must give the original author credit.

If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a licence identical to this one.
- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the licence terms of this work.

In the Wiki window you will find advice on how to present your contribution.

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[4] Creative Commons Licence http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/deed.en_GB/

For example for shorter fast contributions just click edit, type your entry and then don't forget to save it.
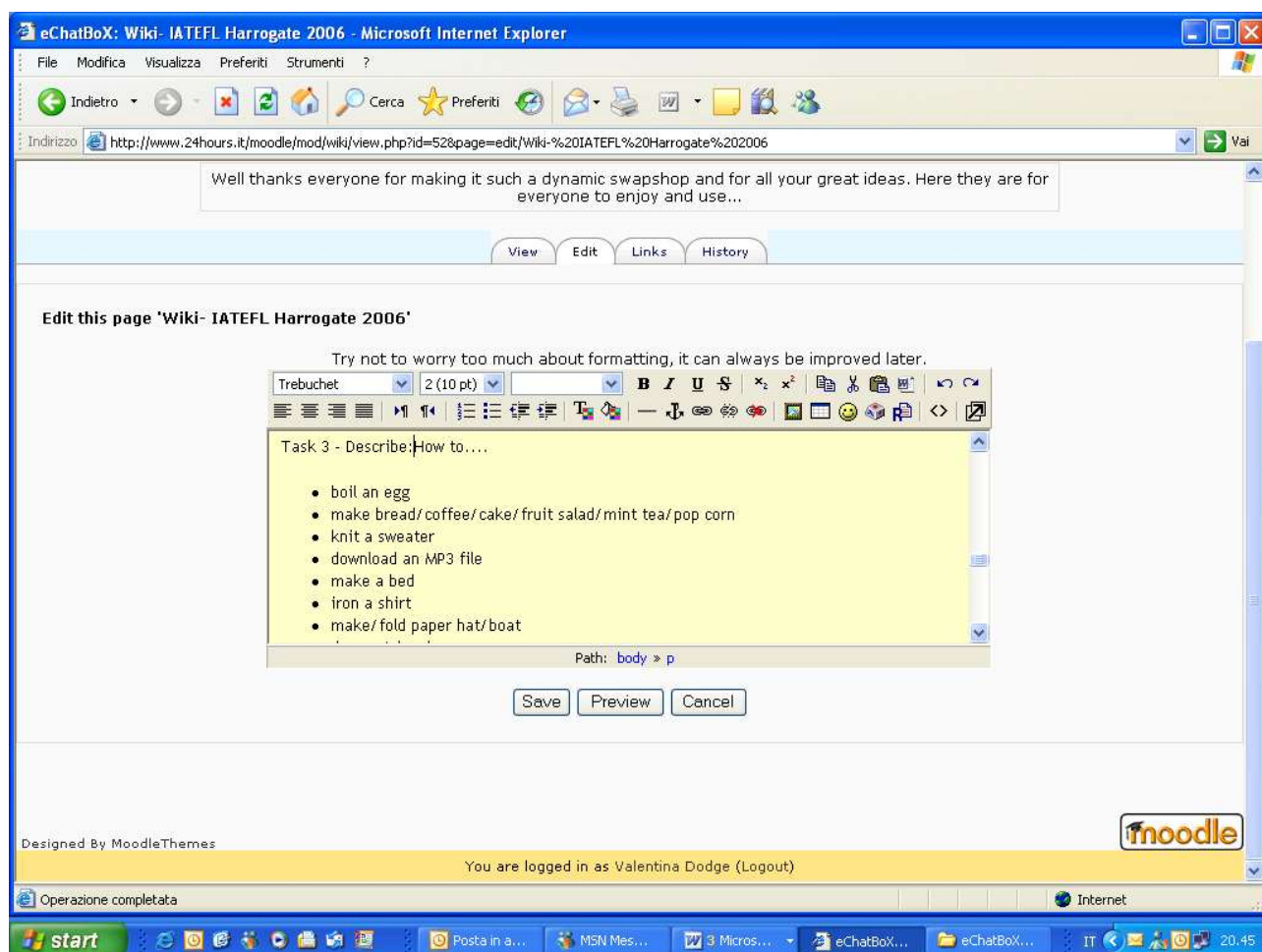
On the task bank Wiki you will notice that longer contributions are encouraged. You will see a message like this: "If you are interested in sharing and exchanging a task you know about, as a real-time moderator/facilitator or as a learner please post it here. We know we have varied teaching contexts but as we have seen bouncing ideas of each other can be so stimulating.
To help us we thought we might indicate ideas under headings (see below) but feel free to adapt or change.
Here are the headings if you feel they will help.

- Name:

- Aim:

- Tools:

- General use:

- Size of group:

- Length of time:

- Method:

- Tip:

- Why I like it:

- Copy/Paste Permission: (Please indicate whether others are permitted to copy and paste the idea).

We are really looking forward to you sharing ideas with you. Thanks again for all your efforts, Valentina & Sheila!

During our swapshop we

- highlighted aspects of "real-time" e-tivities for online English language learners
- presented some e-moderating skills and guidelines to make online chat sessions more successful
- engaged all participants in contributing to a dynamic bank of chatroom ideas and tasks
- discussed practical tips/advice on preparation and chatroom procedures shared some motivating chat tasks (e.g. chat starters and jigsaw activities) make it fun!
- handed over some tips (e.g. have a plan, use an agenda)

The outcomes of our swapshop:
- a range of high-quality creative ideas that everyone can now view, share, or modify.
- lots of positive feedback and thoughtful questions which validate the concept of sharing and developing together.

The swapshop picked up momentum when we started the "let's try" part. The audience were first asked to pretend to be students, answer some fun prompts and then to be moderators and provide some useful activities.

Chat task 1 – Ice-breakers
By alternating the presenter a clear distinction between the audience acting as students and acting as teachers in a training session was made.
Sheila led the 'audience as students sessions' and Valentina the 'audience as teachers part'. Participants were given prompts. The first prompts were
 • Name three items of clothing beginning with "S"
 • Name three things you can buy at hardware store begging with "S"
 • Name three thing you can find on a restaunt table beginning with "S"
In the role of students, the audience responded energetically to this simple warm-up or icebreaker tasks, which in text-based real-time sessions gets learners typing and participating. The raising of a yellow STOP! card signalled them to stop contributing. This is a text-chatroom technique which brings instant order to chaos when used in activities like this and turn-taking strategies are not being implemented to favour fast and interactive participation. During our swapshop the stop signalled the change of roles and participants put on their facilitator hats and began to think up some similar activities in groups suitable to their teaching contexts. The audience scribbled suggestions on specially designed handouts, available on the seats, and posted them into yellow chatboxes (the international yellow post office parcel boxes added a colourful element and was a simple way of simulating the virtual exchange mechanism and building a chatroom resource bank). The thoughtful contributions have now been posted on the exchange but I would like to share some of our favourites:
Name three things
 • that seriously aggravate the human condition
 • might find on an architectural dig
 • you can do in a chat room (ending with "ing")
 • you can do and chat at the same time (e.g. sing)

Our resource bank is mainly catering to English Language teaching but its flexible nature means that a lot of the tips and tricks are applicable and important for all those involved in setting up synchronous sessions so we were happy to receive suggestions for other contexts like the ones for MA teacher trainees.
Name three:

 • things Krashen believed about language learning

 • SLA theorists

 • you want to know more about in language teaching

 • you did with your students that are unforgettable

Chat task 2 – Finish this...

The second chat room task involved finishing idiomatic expressions. Can you pick my.....?

Many brainy (!!) suggestions relevant to participants' own contexts were received. These been uploaded but let us share some of the other language areas that were also touched upon which can adapted and used in similar ways:

- areas of collocation (e.g. take a...break/shower/taxi)
- specific collocations (e.g. fish and chips)
- reordering jumbled sentence
- serial stories
- antonyms/synonyms
- capitals/currencies/countries
- matching proverbs
- international proverbs or idioms (e.g. "head over heels in love")
- complete the list with suitable words (e.g. mother, father, sister ....)
- favourite foreign word

Chat task 3 – Describe

Thirdly, the use of the shared application[5] features such as a virtual whiteboards was demonstrated with a quick 'can you see what it is yet?' guessing game activity which led on to the concept of real-time brainstorming, discussing and describing the stages in a process, for example, what are the steps in the making of an omelette. An all-time favourite face-to-face, this activity can easily be adapted online and the virtual whiteboard is a fun and excellent way to elicit key vocabulary. On our exchange we evaluate software such as Groupboard (www.groupboard.com) and give guidelines on how to install, set up and run sessions using shared application features from features like group browsing to interactive slide shows.

The swapshop audience posted lots of interesting ideas for the describe task. Here are a sample, check the Moodle for the others!

Describe how to:
- manage time
- make an appointment
- create a newsletter
- milk cows
- fall in love
- maintain a relationship
- clean a toilet (sic)
- deal with awkward situation

Hopefully not in that order! I'm still working on most of those!!!

For oil industry company employees in the Gulf describe the
- oil extraction process
- oil refining process

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[5] Shared application features are collaboration tools and are sometimes referred to as synchronous groupware. They allow two or more people to see application windows on each others' computer screens, remotely. Any application's window can be shown and seen, for example, website, a PowerPoint slide, other graphics or a whiteboard.

- oil discovery process onshore
- oil discovery process offshore

For teacher trainees or MA students
- describe how to teach the present progressive
- teach adults
- summarize a discussion forum
- design online tasks
- run a chat session

The last part of our swapshop highlighted ways of using chatscripts (chatroom software automatically archives an electronic log of the text and/or audio session) this chatscript or MP3 file can easily be retrieved and accessed by students. The facilitator just needs to point learners to where it is stored. This unique record can be used in many flexible ways to review and expand vocabulary, for error correction or as a starting point for deeper follow-up writing activities (e.g. now write a recipe for a Spanish omelette or Leaflet with advice for newly enrolled students at your college). Unlike face-to-face sessions that can evaporate into the air when the bell rings electronic communication leaves an immediate record, great for reviewing but also brilliant for the unfortunate class members who couldn't quite make it in real-time!

Question time
The swapshop was rounded off with questions and answer feedback. Here are some of the queries posed:

Q: What is the ideal number of participants in a chat-room at anyone time?
A: Ideally 10 to 12, the smaller the group the easier it is to manage turn taking and the more beneficial it is to those online in real-time. Some chatroom software allow break-out rooms to be created, so the class starts off together and then pre-determined groups enter separate rooms making interaction easier for the learners. We feel this sort of complex chat management requires experience, training and certain amount of skill!

Q: Can I download it?
A: All the material on our Moodle is downloadable. You can view on line or save Word or pdf [6] files to your own PC for off-line reading. The virtual and dynamic nature mean that although we have compiled a compendium (available in topic ten) the site is constantly changing so the wikis are best used online and are set up to offer an easy "copy and paste" solution for synchronous sessions where an e-moderator might want to prepare the session material beforehand.

Q: Does the emoderator/facilitator censor the contributions?
A: I feel that there should be no need to censor what students are contributing – access to chat software will be by invitation only or through a course management system (maybe for online learning or as add-on to face-to-face

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[6] pdf stands for Portable Document Format and is an Adobe Acrobat system of saving documents

sessions. When international exchanges are set up there is more room for gate crashing and possibly rude or offensive contributions. There is normally a kick out or ban button that the moderator can use in an emergency. However, experience shows that once netiquette norms have been established and time given for them to be embraced students will be so engaged in the task there should really be no need to censor anything.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we invite more questions to be posed online so we can respond thoughtfully and expertly (at a distance!) without the fear or emotions of first-time international conference speakers! Our ethos is based on collaborating, sharing, socialising, above all on continuity and development and in starting my part of the conference speech Valentina quoted the old Chinese proverb which was the drive behind the gift in the first place: **"Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand**". So, we invite you to our free exchange! All swapshop participants were given an enrol key to eChatBox and we hereby extend that to all readers and colleagues, come join us and spread the word. To access eChatBox visit www.echatbox.com the enrol key is **24echbx06,** you can register any username or password you like. If you have any difficulties please contact valentinadodge@echatbox.com or sheilavine@echatbox.com .

Last but not least we thank those who helped make this dream come true. This idea and presentation would not have been possible without the constant support of **Gavin Dudeney**, the initial spark and springboard jump that **Nicky Hockly** and the www.theconsultants-e.com courses gave us. Many, many thanks to the **IATEFL Learning Technologies SIG** committee and to **Sophie Ioannou-Georgiou** deputy committee coordinator for selecting Valentina as one of the travel grant award winners and for arranging the presentation on the Learning Technologies Day. A big thanks to the wonderful **audience** that made the scary sweaty-hand presentation fluid and engaging for all present! A special acknowledgement must go to the **IATEFL conference team** and of course, especially to the president, **Tessa Woodward**, for making us feel like special people.

Thank you everyone,
Valentina and Sheila