

Web 2.0

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A chat about chat rooms

Everyone knows about chat rooms – but how to make the best use of them?

For my column this month I have decided to focus on the subject of chat rooms. There are a number of reasons for this; firstly, chat rooms have been around for a very long time – I started using them in the late 1980s. Secondly, they are very easy to setup and use. Third, they can be a very useful way of having a quick conversation if you are in a situation where you're unable to use the telephone. Finally, for reasons which are not entirely clear to me, people do seem to have something of a problem using them.

What types of chat room are available?

There are a variety of different types of chat room available, and one of the earliest and indeed one of the most long-lived are those chat rooms provided by IRC – Internet Relay Chat. This is a system in which people can set up a room and invite other people into it for either a short period of time or in some cases for many hours. Other chat rooms can be created by simply typing in a URL, used for a few moments and then discarded. While most chat rooms allow many people to talk to many people, it is possible to set up a chat room which is really akin to an instant messaging service such as MSN live messenger. These also have their place within this category.

As well as types of chat room, they may well provide you with different levels of functionality. Some of them can simply be used by entering the text that you want to "say" and pressing enter. Your comment is then seen by everybody else in the room. Other chat rooms however are rather more sophisticated, as they will allow you to have general chatter: you may choose to have an individual discussion with one person who is in the room although the actual conversation itself is a "whisper" that only you and the other individual can see. If you are the moderator of a chat room you can choose who is allowed to come into it, and in some instances you can also kick people out of the room if they misbehave or say anything that is socially unacceptable or you can even ban them so that they are unable to come back into

the room at all. Some chat facilities also allow users to chat using different coloured type, thus making it easier to identify. One or two will also allow you to do actions such as "Phil laughs and smiles" rather than simply saying "I'm laughing and smiling".

When you first use a chat room it can be quite intimidating, certainly if it is a room that has been around for some time as the participants will in most cases know each other and will have a shared background of common history or language. However, most chat rooms are very friendly places and they are very welcoming to people who are experiencing them for the first time. One of the most daunting things that you may experience is the speed of conversations, particularly in rooms that have a large number of people, as they will all be discussing or typing things at the same time. Because their contributions are only available in a linear fashion, you may well discover that you get mixed-up conversations that relate to something that was said but has since scrolled off the screen. If you are new to chat rooms, you may find the best thing to do is simply to say hello, explain that you're new to all this, and then sit quietly and watch until you feel confident enough to get involved yourself. As you become more confident you can start to interject comments here and there.

What can you use chat rooms for?

Before looking at some of the actual resources themselves how can you use chat rooms? I suspect that there are as many ways to use chat rooms as there are people who wish to use them. You may find that one good use for chat rooms is to gather together a small number of individuals, perhaps four or five, to talk through a particular subject rather than continually e-mailing each other about it. If your colleagues are spread throughout the country you may find this is an approach that you could use to bring everyone together for a quick conference discussion. You could use a chat room as a way of guiding people around a particular subject area or number of websites. If you are a school or academic librarian, you could perhaps set up a Friday afternoon homework club where students and staff could discuss a particular subject in a more relaxed environment. Alternatively a chat room could be used within a classroom if you wished to discuss a sensitive subject such as sex education. You could also use a chat room as a way of providing access to your expertise for individuals who are unable to get to the library or information centre. A chat room also provides a certain level of social interaction, so while the participants may not be discussing anything of professional interest they can nonetheless start to build bridges and relationships with each other.

Some available chat room tools

My preferred chat room resource is Chatzy at <http://www.chatzy.com>, since you can create a room without a need to register in advance, you can give the URL it creates to any of your contacts and they can simply log straight into the room. As the moderator for the room, you have a large number of options available to you, and finally the instructions are easy to read and follow.

You may wish to also explore the functionality provided by Tinchat (<http://www.tinchat.com>) as this not only supports text chat but if you feel brave you can use it with your webcam and/or a microphone. The chat room can easily be advertised on Twitter, so it's a quick and easy resource that you can use to get a number of colleagues together at short notice. Because of the overhead that's required for broadband access to video and audio, however, I would not suggest using this resource if you wish to have that kind of interactive chat with more than about four people. Another resource that you may wish to consider making use of is Meebo at <http://www.meebo.com> and the advantage that this particular resource provides you with is the ability to type in a URL or the address of a YouTube video which is then available in a frame in the chat room itself. Consequently this would be a really good tool to use if you wanted to provide a quick and dirty overview of a particular subject, or simply provide a guiding resource to a small number of websites that you wanted to display and then chat about. You could try using Chatterous at <http://www.chatterous.com/>, which allows you to embed chat on your site, and you can also use Instant Messenger e-mail and phone with it as well. Alternatively, explore Neat Chat at <http://www.neatchat.com/>, which does not require any signup or software installations; you simply use a Web browser to communicate. Yet another choice is to point your browser to Webbychat at <http://www.webbychat.com/index.php> which has both free and commercial versions available.

Of course you may not wish to chat with a lot of people in one go, but have no fear since there are plenty of other resources that will allow you to chat one to one. You could for example try Plugoo at <http://www.plugoo.com> which you can install on your own website or weblog and link to your own Instant Messenger client such as Windows Messenger, and if somebody wants to chat to you, their message, which they have typed on your site or blog, will appear as if by magic in your Instant Messenger. This is in fact the resource I use on my own website, so if you fancy trying it you are most welcome to do so. If you visit my website at <http://www.philb.com>, simply scroll down the page until you see the checkbox and if the little green light is on that means that I am available. The most common opening lines that I get are "hello", to which I respond, and the next line I get back, almost invariably, is "Are you a computer?". I of course say that I am a human being but when the response to that is "yes well a computer would say that, wouldn't it" it's a little difficult to know how best to proceed. Another similar resource is Gabbly chat at <http://gabbly.com/>, another resource that you can install on your own website. However, you can also use Gabbly to guide somebody around the Internet since you can just add gabbly.com/ to the front of any URL, and the resource will get the Web page bringing back and displayed on the screen, and will allow you to continue your chat.

Summary

That is just a small selection of chat room resources that you may wish to explore; there are however plenty of others available. As with so many Web 2 resources, it is much less about the tool and much more about the activity. I would certainly encourage you all to have a go at chatting, because as well as being a fun and rewarding way to communicate, it has the added advantage of speed and simplicity.