

The Importance of Nonverbal Elements in Online Chat

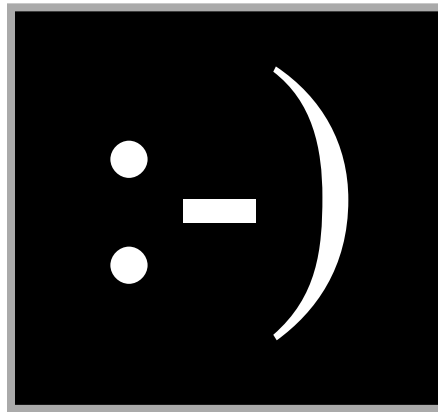
The use of nonverbal elements in text-based virtual interactions provides participants with some of the richness of real-time, face-to-face interactions

By **Joan Gajadhar** and **John Green**

Communication is often not so much what we write or say but how we write and often what we do not say.¹ Thus, meaning in real-world chat messages depends not only on the words we use but also on how we express meaning through nonverbal cues. Online chat is simple, direct, and unrestrained. While it contains many of the elements of face-to-face conversation, it differs from ordinary chat in that it is a textual representation of conversation.²

At the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand we conducted a study involving a chat group specifically set up for a course in computer concepts. Chat provided a nonthreatening environment to enhance the existing asynchronous forums.³ The facilitator actively encouraged student networking as an essential part of creating a learning community similar to the real-time student common room. The chat room functioned as a place where students could “meet,” ask questions, talk about the course, and generally get to know their classmates. Because of the chat group’s voluntary and informal nature, with no incentives for participation, usage numbers fluctuated throughout the 17-week semester. By analyzing student online messages, we could determine whether students were using textual elements to express feelings.

This excerpt from a chat log early in the course illustrates the first stages in online group building. Digressions and interruptions demonstrate the flow of ideas as participants leave and newcomers are greeted and welcomed to the group, just as in real-time group discussion.



Excerpt:

Student #1> This isn't very fast is it, it seems to be a delay.

Lecturer> It's going via the US!

Student #2> just joined (4 members now)

Lecturer> not bad for 24,000 miles!

Student #3> no delay here, its as fast as I can type and read!

Lecturer> Welcome, (Student #2)

Student #1> No wonder there's a delay, it has to turn itself upside down and back again to go there and back.

Lecturer> :-)

Student #2> thanks

Student #5> joins....

Lecturer> Ah (Student #5) welcome!!

Student #3> luv mudub.luh te hname! lol!!

Student #5> mmmmmmm Cheviot here! LOL

Student #1> I'm from Blenheim, usually sunny but cold today, and grey.

Student #3> I'm in Timaru and by the looks of the list may be the only one there.

Student #2> I'm from ChCh deep in the cold

Student #1> Plenty of mainlanders here anyway!

The lecturer's use of exclamation points early in the passage (three times) is then repeated by students later in the log. In fact, Student #3 uses three exclamation points, possibly to reflect enthusiasm. Student #5 follows with “Cheviot here!” Student #1 makes a comment “plenty of mainlanders here anyway” followed by an exclamation point.

The use of place names such as Cheviot, Blenheim, Timaru, and ChCh illustrates students developing rapport and building identity. By disclosing their locations, they start to build a community.

“Mmmmmmmmmmm,” a spoken pause used by Student #5, has several possibilities. It could show thinking, uncertainty, or agreement.

The lecturer uses an emoticon :-) or :) (smiley face) to denote a friendly person and to encourage friendly discourse. Student #5 uses LOL (laughing out loud) in much the same way.

Neuuge argued that chat rooms are reader/writer-driven interactive sites.⁴ He suggested that when human beings enter into cyberspace, they do not leave behind their gregariousness or their inventiveness. We found this lent support to our research results, especially in chats near the end of the semester. While students did use emoticons in the chat sessions, the majority did not attempt to develop new tools, instead constantly reinventing the tools they

Types and Numbers of Nonverbal Expressions Used	
Nonverbal Cue	Number of Occurrences
Multiple ...	210
Multiple !!!!	73
Multiple ????	45
Capitals	21
LOL	39
See ya	37
OK	27
:-)	22
Oops	17
Oh	15
Yep	14
Wow	6
Hey	5

(14 Yep, 27 OK, 6 Wow, 5 Hey, 22 :-), 73 Multiple !!!!, shown in Table 1), there was little evidence of disagreement (45 uses of Multiple ????, shown in Table 2). This could be due to the nature of the group and the presence of a lecturer at the sessions.

Conclusions

Nonverbal communication adds nuance or richness of meaning that cannot be communicated by verbal elements alone. Given time and experience, some of the same richness of real-time, face-to-face communication can occur in a virtual, text-based medium. The following actions can foster this virtual communication.

- *Encourage the use of nonverbal elements.* More encouragement and use of nonverbal support in the orientation and emergence phases of group building can aid in building rapport in groups.
- *Consider size when designing an online support group.* In smaller groups, more students take an active part. They tend to want to express feelings as well as content.

Intent of Nonverbal Communication	
Intent	Number of Occurrences
Exclamation for emphasis	90
Expression of happiness	72
Agreement	51
Question	48
Negative exclamation	41
Exit word	40
Negative emotion	32
Emphasis	29
Positive exclamation	19

had at hand to fit the developing social community.

Data Collection

We recorded 15 chats for analysis. We categorized the data by frequency (Table 1) and intent (Table 2).⁵

Analysis

Many of the students frequently used onomatopoeia, words such as whizz, eek, eh, aaarr (suggesting relief, frustration, annoyance, or an injection of humour), or beep beep beep (expressing a desire to get into the conversation—"make way, I'm coming" or "let's move on").

Negative emotions and exclamations (73) were used less frequently than positive, happy, agreeable exclamations (142, shown in Table 2). The student who commented in one log ("man I am so stupid") might be searching for a disclaimer from classmates such as, "no you're not." This possibly illustrates the students' need for upbeat, encouraging, supportive feelings from the group.

While we recorded 152 expressions that could be construed as agreement

■ *Develop incentives to encourage participation.* Because of the voluntary nature of this course's chat, we could encourage participation but not give any incentives for taking part. This could have affected the nature of the contributions.

■ *Consider providing help for those new to the environment.* A number of students logged on but took little or no part. Perhaps just as in real-time conversation, it is sometimes easier to wait and listen. However, it can also signify an unwillingness to enter unfamiliar territory.

An encouraging note from our study⁶ was that chat-room facilitators will not need to undertake a course in orthographic pictures and trendy acronyms to lead effective chat groups. Students already communicate effectively by appropriating old typographical symbols and putting them to new uses. *e*

Endnotes

1. J. DeVito, *Human Communication* (New York: Longman Publishing, 2000).
2. M. Giese, "Self Without Body: Textual Self-Representation in an Electronic Community," *First Monday*, 1998, <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_4/giese/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2005).
3. For an example of public, general-interest forums, see Delphi Forums at <<http://www.delphiforums.com>> (accessed May 10, 2005).
4. T. Neuage, "Literature Review on Chat Room Conversation," 2000, <<http://www.angelfire.com/on/hypertextual/ethics.html>> (accessed June 14, 2005).
5. For the complete study and analysis, see J. Gajadhar and J. Green, "An Analysis of Nonverbal Communication in an Online Chat Group," Open Polytechnic of New Zealand Working Papers, 2003, <<http://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/aboutus/research/otherresearch/auworking1.html>> (accessed May 10, 2005).
6. *Ibid.*

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