

7 things you should know about...

Instant Messaging

Scenarios

George really likes his computer science professor. She is the first of his instructors who doesn't seem threatened by wireless access in the classroom. In addition to googling lecture topics real-time, George has found five or six other people to "chat" with in class. At first they competed to see who could google fastest; now they try to solve homework problems collectively before the class is over. While his group sometimes sits together and talks after class, George often finds himself punctuating face-to-face conversations with IM quips.

Renee knew that a colleague was attending the same conference she was but was not sure if she would recognize him. Because she had decided at the last minute to attend the event, she had neglected to get his contact information. After several hundred people wandered out of the first plenary session, Renee gave up trying to identify John and instead opened her chat client. John was on her buddy list and had changed his description to list his location. She sent a quick note and suggested they meet in the main foyer for lunch.

It's late. Sheila really needs to get started on her part of a group presentation, but she doesn't know how the rest of the team are progressing with their sections. She has sent several e-mails to her teammates but hasn't gotten a response. Then she notices that the team leader is online. Sheila decides this is the right moment and pings him with a quick question. She is relieved when he not only responds but also asks her a question. They settle down to work and hammer out the rest of the presentation.

Steven needed more information on a data sample he was reviewing for his lab report, but he was not sure how to proceed. He had sent several e-mails to the scientist who generated the data but so far had not gotten a response. Although he knew Dr. Michelson was extremely busy, Steven was particularly interested in how the sample had been prepared. As he got ready to send yet another e-mail, he noticed that he was being paged by a new contact in chat. He quickly saw that Dr. Michelson was online, on chat, and had time to talk.

What is it?

Instant messaging (IM) is a form of online communication that allows real-time (or close to real-time) interaction through personal computers or mobile computing devices. Users can exchange messages privately, similar to e-mail, or join group conversations. Although typed text remains the primary convention for IM, the technology has grown significantly from early versions and now allows users to send images, audio and video files, and other attachments.

Early versions of IM appeared in the late 1990s, and the list of IM tools has grown to include dozens of applications. Technologies that enable IM—such as wireless connectivity and mobile devices—have become widespread, providing a "critical mass" for IM to reach near ubiquity. At the same time, many vendors whose primary business is something other than IM have added IM functionality to their products. Nearly all learning management systems have incorporated chat tools, ranging from the elegant and sophisticated, which include icons, sounds, and pictures, to the rudimentary, which simply provide text in boxes.

The interactive nature of IM is closer to spoken conversation than written correspondence, allowing users to communicate in a manner that e-mail does not. IM users have a sense of presence of other users, as if they were in a room together. At the same time, the technology facilitates the kind of on-screen interaction, with its perceptions of distance and safety, that many find especially comfortable.

Who's doing it?

Large and growing numbers of teens—today's and tomorrow's college students—are regular users of IM, both as a personal communication tool and, in some cases, for educational initiatives in high school. As IM matures into an accepted means of communication, and as ever-larger numbers of students arrive on campus as seasoned IM users, colleges and universities are adding IM to campus functions ranging from recruiting and admissions to teaching and support. Some institutional libraries have set up online reference desks with IM applications, and faculty have begun using the technology to facilitate virtual office hours. For many current and prospective students, IM is becoming the preferred mode of contact with recruiters and admissions staff, the registrar's office, and academic advisors.

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How does it work?

Functionality ranges widely for IM applications, but typically users log in to a service with a screen name or ID. Most IM applications notify users when others join or leave, and many allow users to indicate their status, such as “away from desk” or “in a meeting.” Once logged in, you can send messages to individuals or join IM sessions. Most IM windows include an area where messages are displayed chronologically and a composition box where messages are typed. Composition boxes usually allow basic formatting of text, and most let you add images, multimedia files, or other attachments. When someone types an instant message, the chat client indicates that a message is being composed. When the message is sent, it pops up on your screen in front of other applications.

Why is it significant?

Hundreds of millions of people use IM to stay connected. In many ways, IM epitomizes the notion of the always-connected, multi-tasking student, sending and receiving messages at all hours, from a wide spectrum of devices, while doing several other things at the same time. For many students, the technology has become as ingrained in daily life as telephones are for older generations. Many colleges and universities are working to incorporate IM into the educational aspects of students’ lives, rather than relegating it to a social function.

IM interactions are infused with a level of serendipity and the possibility of chance encounters online that are unique to the medium. Some applications allow users to set a status of “hidden.” Even though you cannot tell they are online, they might suddenly send you a message. You can send a message to someone who is logged in, but perhaps she is away from her computer. Maybe she is in class or otherwise occupied but hasn’t set her status to show that.

IM users have developed an evolving syntax that includes shorthand, acronyms, symbols, and other elements that constitute a unique lexicon, encouraging users to interact in ways not possible either in person or with other forms of electronic communication. While this dynamic expands access to students who are uneasy with other types of communication, it also provides new modes of expression for students who are otherwise comfortable participating in class. IM creates an environment that approximates the sharing of a physical space, allowing distance students to engage in learning that approaches face-to-face meetings.

The technology is also promoting the practice of creating “back channels,” or secondary conversations that happen at the same time, for example, as a lecture, board meeting, or conference call. Students in a lecture hall might use IM to ask each other questions about the lecture topic and share their thoughts without interrupting the professor.

What are the downsides?

The flip side of offering new modes of interaction is that the technology might encourage some participants to engage in offensive, disruptive, or other behavior that, in different contexts, they

would see as inappropriate. As with any new form of communication, IM can lead to misunderstandings about what others are trying to convey. Moreover, the always-on notion of IM carries the risk of unrealistic expectations about how quickly users can expect responses. Because messages pop up on users’ screens who are logged in, some consider the technology to be a source of continual distractions.

Users of IM technologies face a number of security risks. Although sending attachments through IM fosters a richer experience, those files are subject to viruses and other malware, particularly since IM attachments often bypass antivirus software. Some IM networks are more susceptible than others to eavesdropping, and a problem looming on the horizon is that of “spim,” the IM version of spam. Because it’s difficult to verify the source of an instant message, some people have begun sending unwanted messages to IM clients, with bogus advertisements or solicitations for personal information.

Where is it going?

Just as IM tools are showing up in non-IM software, so too are traditionally non-IM features included in IM applications, blurring the lines between types of applications. The introduction of new consumer electronic devices and the growing functionality of existing ones are broadening the scope of IM availability. Video chat applications are appearing, and IM networks are starting to allow users to send messages to users who are not online and to see archived transcripts of past messages. New IM features are being added to allow richer conversations, such as turn taking, collaborative composition, and game playing. The proliferation of IM-capable devices will bring new uses of the technology that take advantage of its unique nature.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Students who use IM feel connected with peers and faculty, and some users have found that IM facilitates semiformal distance relationships that are difficult to create through other media. IM offers higher education a new mode of communication, often for relatively low cost and without significant overhead for IT infrastructure. Increasingly, students will arrive on campus having spent years using IM, expecting the technology to be part of their educational lives. In addition, because IM is used for communication in many corporations, for many its use will extend beyond college.