

Online Class

Communication Basics

In an online class, strong communication is critical to student success. Communication strategies must be deliberately planned into the course to enable contact between students and the instructor, and among the students. Most communication tools used in online classes are text-based, which present additional challenges.

ALWAYS REMEMBER...

THE TONE OF YOUR COMMUNICATION IS CRITICAL

The unfortunate truth of text-only communication is that it is easier to read a message with a more negative tone than the writer may have intended. The tone of any communication with students should be more conversational than formal. This can reduce the likelihood of a student interpreting the message as overly-critical, and makes the instructor more approachable.

Text can also include non-verbal components, based on the punctuation, capitalization, and formatting. Consider the different tones that can be conveyed by simple changes to the same sentence:

- Remember a cover page next time.
- REMEMBER A COVER PAGE NEXT TIME.
- Remember a cover page next time!
- Remember a cover page next time 😊
- Remember a cover page next time.

Always be polite – It is better to be overly polite than be seen as critical and unapproachable.

DON'T READ TOO MUCH INTO THE TONE OF STUDENT MESSAGES

Just as students can easily read a negative tone in an instructor's message, instructors can easily read a more negative tone in a student's message. When a student is upset or frustrated, their messages can easily be read as rude or demanding. Consider the different tones that the student could be "speaking" in. Instead of rude and demanding, could they be confused or pleading? In general, try to react only to the words rather than the implied tone.

ETIQUETTE MATTERS

Proper Internet etiquette, or netiquette, should always be part of your online communication. While there are a large assortment of guidelines, ranging from very general to specific, these are a few basic rules that can guide you through most situations.

1. DO NOT USE ALL CAPITAL LETTERS – This is seen as yelling.
2. Always be polite – without facial expressions and tone, it is easy to come across as rude.
3. Watch out for humor or sarcasm – again, without tone or expressions, some students may miss the joke and be insulted.
4. Avoid using slang or acronyms - unless those acronyms are defined within your class.

5. Generally, avoid online communication when you are upset or tired – you are much more likely to come across as rude, demanding, or just plain mean. Wait a little while and send the message after you can view it with clear eyes.

YOU CAN SET A COMMUNICATION POLICY FOR THE CLASS

At the start of an online class, set out a communications policy that sets the expectations for both instructor and students. Or, consider working with the students to define a set of communication rules that will bind the entire class. Consider:

- How should students contact you?
- How should you contact students?
- How quickly are you expected to reply to a message?
- How quickly are students expected to reply to a message?
- What netiquette rules will everyone in the class follow?

THE FOUR MOST IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION TOOLS

In most online classes, the majority of the contact between the students and the instructor is done through four channels.

EMAIL / CLASS MESSAGES

Email, or an email-like tool built into the online course, is usually the primary means for students to contact their instructor, or for the instructor to reach out to individual students. This makes it important that instructors check email frequently and reply to all messages promptly. A turnaround time of less than 24 hours is ideal.

Instructors should let students know when to expect replies to email messages. If a 24 hour response time is not feasible, set timeframes that are appropriate to you and your class. Some suggestions include replying to all messages by the end of the next school day, within 24 hours during the school week, or even posting the times when you will check email each day.

CLASS ANNOUNCEMENTS

Announcements can be used to reach out to the entire class at once. These often appear on the main page of the online course. Announcements can be used to remind students of upcoming projects, give an overview of the week's activities and due dates, share first impressions of an assignment and provide a timeframe for feedback, or offer a recap of a previous week's discussions and activities. This is a good way of letting students know that you are also active in the class. Consider using announcements at least once a week to keep students up-to-date.


DISCUSSION BOARDS

Online discussion boards are the most commonly used way of encouraging student communication and cooperation. Discussions can serve many purposes within a class, including encouraging student reflection, developing critical thinking skills, demonstrating an understanding of key class topics, and building a community of learners.

Discussions don't need to be text-only. Add pictures, diagrams, or even videos to discussion prompts and posts.

Discussion boards are often used for class introductions, to allow students to share information about themselves and learn about their peers. Instructors should also participate in these introductions.

When designing discussion questions, make sure they are open-ended to allow for discussion, rather than simply answering the question. Questions should encourage students to think of why, how, or what would happen. When possible, try to make discussion prompts realistic, rather than theoretical. Class discussions are not limited to simple question-based prompts. Consider having a guest “lecturer” visit your class and participate in the discussion boards, providing information on their specialty or career and answering student questions. Other strategies that can encourage active discussions are debates, role-playing scenarios, sharing related current events, or peer reviews of class assignments.

Setting minimum requirements on discussion post length or complexity will help avoid students posting nothing but “I agree” or “Like” 

It is important to set expectations for class discussions. Without clear requirements, students will likely not participate in the discussions. Setting minimum requirements for the number of posts students must make, the number of replies they must make, and the post length or complexity will encourage students to make thoughtful contributions. Simple rubrics are very useful for both communicating these expectations and grading class discussions. Break down points based on criteria such as proper spelling and grammar, meaningful contributions, linking the arguments to class readings or outside sources, and following other discussion guidelines. Avoid giving points based on finding the “right” answer, as the point of discussions is not to arrive at a pre-determined answer, but share knowledge, understanding and opinions.

FEEDBACK

Feedback is not a single tool, but an integral part of all activities in an online class. Feedback is more than just the student’s score for an assignment, test or activity, but should include personalized, detailed comments from the instructor. Feedback provides guidance for the students, helping them know where they fell short and what they need to improve on going forward.

Good feedback should feel encouraging, even if you are having to point out problems with their work. Always watch the tone of negative feedback, as it is very easy to come across as harsh. Feedback should also be personalized as much as possible. Make sure that your comments refer to specific problems or highlights of their work whenever possible.

It is important for students to be able to give feedback, as well as receive it. Offer students the chance to share what went well with the class and what aspects they struggled with. Consider having two chances for students to offer feedback, once at mid-term and once at the end. The mid-term feedback could be used to improve the second half of the class. Instructors should be receptive to student feedback in online classes. Let students’ experiences help shape future improvements to the class.

MORE COMMUNICATION OPTIONS

There are many more communication channels that instructors and students can use in online classes. Instructors should use as many channels as they feel comfortable with to connect with students; more channels for communication leads to more flexibility and more chances to encourage learning.

- Synchronous chats – Chat rooms or instant messaging allows for students and instructors to communicate in real-time.
- Video chats – Real-time video chats let students and instructors have more natural conversations. These options include Skype, Adobe Connect, and Google Hangouts.
- Social media – Many students are already using social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. Depending on school regulations, you may be able to incorporate these in to your class.
- Recorded videos – Videos recorded with a cell phone or webcam can allow students and instructors to share their understanding, observations or opinions.
- Blogs – Web blogs can be used as online journals. Students and instructors can offer comments, and posts could be shared with the school or community.

With technology continually evolving, more options for communication are always being developed. Instructors are limited only by their creativity.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation, Edutopia

<http://goo.gl/DYzXA9>

Infographic – Why Aren't Your Students Participating on the Discussion Board

<http://goo.gl/x2Z2du>

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