Effective Online Communication

Even for seasoned users of the Internet, communicating online can be a minefield of misunderstandings. It is therefore imperative that instructors enter the online classroom armed with strategies for effective online communication.

In her article "Lost in Translation: Importance of Effective Communication in Online Education," Kristin Betts lays out the basics of online communication. She grounds her strategies with the Tubbs Communication Model, in which messages are defined as being transmitted verbally and/or nonverbally, intentionally and/or unintentionally.

In the Tubbs model, "the transmittal of the message may be affected by the communication channel." In the face-to-face classroom, communication includes not just what the instructor says, but visual and vocal cues. These nonverbal or unintentional verbal cues can affect how students interpret the message. In an online classroom however, "there is a shift and increased emphasis on words, particularly with written communication. Lexicon, semantics, and syntax can greatly affect how a written message is conveyed and interpreted…" (Betts, 2009).

The way these unintentional/intentional messages can impact the way messages are received by students can be seen in the following examples of written feedback provided to a student:

- **DO NOT INCLUDE A COVER PAGE ON YOUR NEXT PAPER!!!**
- **DO NOT INCLUDE** a cover page on your **<u>NEXT paper</u>**!
- *Do not include* a cover page on your next paper ☹
- Do not include a cover page on your next paper ☺
- Do not include a cover page on your next paper.

Although the words remain the same in each example, the tone changes based on the inclusion of CAPS, **<u>text formatting</u>**, color, and emoticons ☺

Betts then follows up with this example:

- Remember, do not include a cover page on your next paper.
- Remember, do not include a cover page on your next paper ☺

She explains, "although the message is essentially identical to the previous set of sample feedback, consider how the addition of the word 'remember' as well as the decreased usage of intentional nonverbal/text change the tone of the message" (Betts, 2009).

Best Practices in Online Communication

To help effectively manage your online classroom, the LTO has gathered the following best practices in online communication.

The most important aspect of online communication is to **be present**! Students must be able to "see" you before they feel comfortable communicating with you or each other. Being visibly present online motivates students, improves student learning, and creates a sense of classroom community.

Once you have made your presence known, here are some strategies to foster communication in the online classroom, adapted from the Carleton University's document on "Facilitating Effective Online Discussions":

- **Acknowledge first responses right away:** Don't wait until a preordained time or for a certain number of comments to appear before responding. First impressions are important for creating an online community, and prompt responses show students that you value their contributions to the online forum.
- **Foster a warm environment:** Students may initially feel uncomfortable communicating online, or they may be unsure of the tone that is expected.
  Be outgoing and positive, and encourage an informal, conversational style. Address students by their names or by nicknames they provide, and engage them in small talk to help them relate to you as a person.
- **Model how to be a productive participant:** As the instructor, it is your responsibility to set the tone, style, frequency, and depth of discussion. "Be the first to post and say something provocative, or ask a probing question to get the ball rolling."
- **Model how to give feedback:** Always start with something positive and end with suggestions for further thought.
- **Respond to comments that have not received a response:** Ensure that all contributions are validated – move the discussion along with questions for other students to consider.
- **Encourage students to respond to each other:** "Watch for emerging patterns in discussions and stimulate debate, offer ideas, connect different students' ideas, and point out contrasts."
- **Encourage reluctant participants:** Determine if there are any specific problems, from technical issues to lack of confidence, that are hindering a student's participation, and do your best to address the issues.
- **Focus dominant participants' energy:** Show appreciation for the enthusiasm and outspokenness of your most vocal participants, and then use these qualities to benefit your entire class, for example, by assigning them to mentor less active students.
- **Ask probing questions:** Ensure discussion goes deeper than the surface level by pushing for more critical thinking. Examples include:
  - If you were to take the other side of the argument, what evidence might you raise?
  - If you were [name an influential figure discussed in class], what might you say about that point?
  - What reasons/evidence is there for that point?
  - What alternatives are there to your idea?
- **Reward quality over quantity:** Provide positive feedback to contributors who enhance the discussion. Encourage contributions that stimulate discussion, rather than rewarding students for the sheer number of their postings.
- **Summarize discussion:** "Weave comments together regularly, refer to specific comments, interpret main points of view, and provide a general summary to give a solid feeling of one discussion ending before the next begins" (Carleton)

Integrating Online Discussions Into Your Course

For online discussions to be most effective, students must see them as being an integral part of your course. Therefore, the University of Waterloo suggests the following strategies for integrating online discussions into your course design:

- **Connect the discussions to your course objectives:** "Consider what course objectives you expect discussions to fulfill and how you will integrate them into your course as a whole. What do you want your students to gain from the discussions?"

- **Set early deadlines for posting**: Integrate online discussions into your course by bringing interesting points and ideas generated in the online forum into other parts of your course, whether by bringing them up at your next lecture or requiring that students use quotations from the discussion as part of an assignment.
- **Use online discussions regularly**: It is important to keep momentum going, or the online community you've created will quickly evaporate. Regularly schedule online discussions, and eventually checking the discussion board will become a habit for students.
- **Include online discussion participation in the course grade and make participation requirements explicit:** Provide clear guidelines and expectations to students at the beginning of the course. Be explicit in what you require and how this will be rewarded in their grade (Waterloo).

Using the Discussion Board

The discussion board is a powerful tool available to instructors working in the online environment; however, careful planning is required for the discussion board to reach its full potential. Structured activities on a discussion board can lead to an increase in critical thinking and engagement with the learning process.

Wilson and Fairchild (2011) have listed some activities that have been shown to be successful:

1. **Directed discussions:** All students must post one of their ideas in response to a specific topic, each student must respond to a set number of their peers within a certain timeline.
2. **Group work:** Break students into groups and have them work collaboratively on answering a question from the course material. Have each group respond to the posts of other groups.
3. **Summary:** "Following initial posting of student replies to a set question, students must create a synopsis of the important points learned from the responses of their peers."
4. **Writing workshops:** Have students post a draft of their essay or paper, and then require each student to respond to the work of their peers. Encourage students to consider the feedback they've received when working on their final product.
5. **Brainstorming:** To get students thinking, have them brainstorm on a topic that hasn't yet come up in class.
6. **Referencing:** Require students to conduct scholarly research on a particular subject, and then post the results of their search, with full citations. Another idea would be to have students find information on the Internet and then share their evaluation of its validity.
7. **Debates:** Divide the class into groups or teams to research an issue that is subject to a variety of viewpoints or perspectives. "As differences in opinion occur, students ask other to explain reasoning or defend views. With some subjects, the instructor or moderator can assist students in developing a consensus position."
8. **Student presentation critiques:** "Students post a presentation (typically a PowerPoint presentation) on an assigned topic and include 'student notes' and a 'quiz' on that subject matter. Peers must comment on their work, as well as ask for clarification on items not completely understood. Questions from the presenters' quiz may be included in course assessments."
9. **Mentoring or "coffee shops":** Create an open thread that students can use to ask questions of peers through the semester.

See the next section of this document for rubrics for assessing online participation

Instructor-facilitated Online Discussion Participation Rubric

Rubric developed by Northern Arizona University: http://www2.nau.edu/d-elearn/support/tutorials/discrubrics/disc1.php

Participation in the discussion forums is critical for maximizing student learning experiences in any online course. In this course, students are required to be a part of an online community of learners who collectively interact, through discussion, to enhance and support the professional performance of each other. Part of the assessment criteria for the course includes evaluating the quality and quantity of your participation in the discussion forum.

As the instructor, I will facilitate student discussions but I will not address every single post. In most cases, I might share a related idea, intervene when the discussion goes off-track, or tie student comments together to help deepen student learning. Consequently, I will not directly answer questions in the discussion area unless they are addressed to me. I will check the discussions daily during the week, and occasionally on the weekends.

Some characteristics I consider to be part of excellent discussion contributions are outlined below. I will consider these characteristics when assessing the quality and level of student participation.

- Submit initial post(s) early in the session, and subsequent responses to the posts of other learners at timely intervals throughout the duration of the session. The goal is to have a dynamic discussion around the topic that lasts throughout the entire session.
- Posts and responses should be thorough and thoughtful. Just posting an "I agree" or "Good ideas" will not be considered adequate. Support statements with examples, experiences, or references. Be brief — keep each post and response to one or two short paragraphs. Keep in mind that fellow learners will be reading and responding to you, too.
- Posts should be within a range of 75-150 words. If a post does not meet the minimum word count of 75, I will not count it toward your grade.
- Make certain that all posts and responses address the question, problem, or situation as presented for discussion. This does not mean you should not extend the topic, but do not stray from the topic.
- Discussions occur when there is dialogue; therefore, you need to build upon the posts and responses of other learners to create discussion threads. Make sure to revisit the discussion forum and respond (if necessary) to what other learners have posted to your initial responses.
- When relevant, add to the discussion by including prior knowledge, work experiences, references, web sites, resources, etc. (giving credit when appropriate).
- Contributions to the discussions (posts and responses) should be complete and free of grammatical or structural errors.

Discussion Participation Rubric

Criteria	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Exemplary
Quantity and Timeliness	Does not submit at least one initial response early in the session and/or does not submit at least two peer responses closer to the end of the session. 3 points	Submits at least one initial response early in the session, and at least two peer responses closer to the end of the session. 3.75 points	Submits one initial response early in the session, and two or more thoughtful peer responses early in the session, and more than two peer responses closer to the end of the session. 5 points
Spelling and mechanics	Does not submit posts that are in complete sentences. Or two or more of the complete sentences are grammatically incorrect and have greater than 2 spelling errors. 3 points	Submits posts that have one or more grammatically incorrect sentences and two spelling errors. 3.75 points	Submits posts that contain grammatically correct sentences without any spelling errors. 5 points
Demonstrates knowledge and understanding of content and applicability to professional practice	Post(s) and responses show little evidence of knowledge and understanding of course content and applicability to professional practice. 3 points	Post(s) and responses show evidence of knowledge and understanding of course content and applicability to professional practice. 3.75 points	Post(s) and responses show evidence of knowledge and understanding of course content and applicability to professional practice, and include other resources that extend the learning of the community. 5 points
Generates learning within the community	Posts do not attempt to elicit responses and reflections from other learners and/or responses do not build upon the ideas of other learners to take the discussion deeper. 3 points	Posts attempt to elicit responses and reflections from other learners and responses build upon the ideas of other learners to take the discussion deeper. 3.75 points	Posts elicit responses and reflections from other learners and responses build upon and integrate multiple views from other learners to take the discussion deeper. 5 points

Total Possible Points: 20 points

Note: Customize the total number of points depending on how much participation counts in the overall course design.

Online Classroom Attendance and Participation Rubric

Hi Class,

I want to make sure everyone is clear about the difference between **logging on**, **attendance**, and **participation**. Don't worry, I know week one has a steep learning curve - I take this into account for week one participation.

Logging On

When we "log on" we might spend a great deal of time reading the course content- please realize that the system can track how long you spend in the course; however, it cannot tell exactly what you are doing. As a result, "logging on" is not part of either attendance or participation.

Attendance

Attendance is also determined internally by the system. To be in attendance each week you must post a message to any of the class discussions on two separate days in our course week. (The course week may vary depending on how the course is set up). **By posting all weekly assignments on time, you will automatically meet the attendance requirement.**

Participation

Participation in this course represents a significant part of your final grade. I calculate participation on both the quantity and quality of the posts that are topic driven and meaningful to the development of the class discussion. **To earn full participation points you must post at least two substantive messages on three different days of the course week.**

For example, if the course week runs from Monday to Sunday, you might post two messages on Tuesday and two messages on Thursday and two messages on Saturday. To ensure you get credit for all your posts, you might consider posting more than two each day.

Assignments and responses in the Chat room do not count towards participation. Only notes in the Course Discussion Topics area count towards participation.

I hope this clarifies attendance and participation. Thanks!

Discussion Participation Rubric

	No Participation	Unsubstantial Participation	Partial Participation	Full Participation
Quality of Posting	Does not post an original peer response. 0 points	Post is not original and simply paraphrases what others have said or just says, "I agree..." or "Good idea..." 2 points	Post is original and contributes at least one new idea or example that adds value to the discussion. 3 points	Post is original and contributes >1 new idea or example that adds value to the discussion. 4 points
Quantity of Posting	At this point, it does not appear that you have posted any responses to your classmates in the Main forum. To earn full participation, post a substantive message twice a day on three different days. 0 points	Partial participation points earned this week. You have a good start at participation, but for a post to count toward participation credit, it must be substantial. Thoroughly discuss or converse with classmates. Say more than just "I agree" or "Good ideas". Have a conversation. To earn full participation, post twice a day on three different days. You are to have two a day on three different days to earn full credit. Good start overall! 2 points	Good start at participation this week. Your contributions to classroom discussion are stimulating and a pleasure to read. However, make sure to spread out evenly these participation posts. You are to have two a day on three different days to earn full credit. Thanks for sharing! 3 points	Full participation points earned this week! Fantastic! Your contributions to classroom discussion are stimulating and a pleasure to read. Thanks for sharing! 4 points
Length of Posting	Does not post a peer response in the discussion topic area during the discussion period. 0 points	n/a	Post does not meet the minimum word count of 75 words. 3 points	Post meets the minimum word count. 4 points

Prepared by Michelle Schwartz, Instructional Design and Research Strategist, for the Learning & Teaching Office, http://www.ryerson.ca/lto

Timeliness of Posting	Does not post a peer response in the discussion topic area during the discussion period. 0 points	n/a	n/a	Posts peer responses during the discussion period. 4 points
Degree of Peer Interactivity	Does not interact with peers in the discussion topic area. 0 points	Writes unsubstantive peer responses throughout the discussion period. This does not include the initial response to the instructor's initial discussion question, but does include responses to peers and any additional instructor responses. 2 points	Writes at least 2 substantive peer responses throughout the discussion period. This does not include the initial response to the instructor's initial discussion question, but does include responses to peers and any additional instructor responses. 3 points	Writes > 6 substantive peer responses throughout the discussion period. This does not include the initial response to the instructor's initial discussion question, but does include responses to peers and any additional instructor responses. 4 points

Total Possible Points: 20 points

Note: Customize the total number of points depending on how much participation counts in the overall course design.

Rubric developed by Northern Arizona University: http://www2.nau.edu/d-elearn/support/tutorials/discrubrics/attendpart.php

Prepared by Michelle Schwartz, Instructional Design and Research Strategist, for the Learning & Teaching Office, http://www.ryerson.ca/lto

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