

Interaction and Communication

Our interactions online are obviously different than when we meet with our students face to face. We have to think carefully about the words we type and consider how the student will interpret what we're saying. This is especially true because students can't hear the tone of our voices or see our faces in what we write. If I'm discussing a student's project in my actual classroom, I might offer the same criticism that I'd offer online, but in person the student could hear that my tone and expression were kind and respectful, which softens the impact of the words. Typed into an online forum, though, those exact words could come across as much more negative or harsh than I'd meant them to be.

Some online instructors find that using emoticons (emojis) will soften a critical message or give discussion posts a friendlier tone, but we shouldn't over-use them. Our communications with students should always be appropriately professional. In fact, we should insist upon professionalism in all communications within the online classroom, upholding the standards of businesslike written communication. This means that expressions like "LOL" or "OMG" are unacceptable, as is not capitalizing the word "I", using "u" instead of "you" and failing to employ grammatically correct college-level written English. It also includes proofreading our own comments before clicking "post" or "submit." Accuracy is important. We always notice our student's errors, but they notice *our* mistakes even more acutely. Adhering to these expectations helps to ensure that our messages are clear, but perhaps even more importantly it models the kind of proficient written communication that students will be expected to meet once they begin working in the professional sector.

Online learning environments typically require the instructor to post comments in discussions and on assignments. These can be written, but you can also use tools built into the LMS to post a short audio or video clip. Your comments are a powerful tool for enhancing your students' learning. Indeed, this is where you do most of your real teaching online: through the information and guidance you offer beyond lectures and assignments. It is also a key point of contact for strengthening your rapport with your students.

Online, we lack the physical presence and visual cues that we take for granted in a face-to-face setting, so we have to compensate for this by being much more deliberate in our interactions with students. Successful strategies* include:

- Providing frequent and immediate feedback.
- Sharing personal information; being open and approachable.
- Demonstrating friendliness in communication (ex: beginning an email with, "Good morning, Students! I hope that all of you had an enjoyable weekend. Our first task this week is ...")
- Ensuring that communication is comfortable.
- Making personal contact; reaching out by phone to students who are struggling or who have "disappeared" from the classroom.
- Offering to help students improve poor work and re-submit it for a better grade.
- Providing sincere positive reinforcement, encouragement, or praise.
- Ensuring that students know how to contact you and that they feel comfortable doing so.
- Answering all student communications promptly.
- Using humor whenever possible.
- Admitting your mistakes and offering an apology.
- Showing care and concern, especially if students report personal problems that have prevented them from turning in their work on time or participating according to expectations.
- Using technologies with which students are familiar such as instant messaging or text messaging.

* Murphy, E., and Rodriguez-Manzanares, M. (January 2012). Rapport in Distance Education. The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning. Vol 13, No 1. <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1057/2076>

I've also found that addressing each student by name in each discussion response is a good tool for establishing and maintaining relationships. It's the written equivalent of making eye contact while you're speaking to someone. As much as possible, I'll use the student's preferred name or nickname, too, if they've shared that with me, and I ask them to sign their posts with that name if it's different than the one that appears automatically in the LMS. If Elizabeth Jones shares in her introductory post that she prefers to be called E.J., then my comments to her will be something like this: "You're right, E.J. – one of the most important aspects of leadership is taking on the role of active listening. When do you think that a person in a position of authority could best demonstrate this trait?"

If a student asks a question in a bricks-and-mortar classroom, the instructor can respond immediately. When a student asks a question in an online discussion forum or via email, they must wait for the instructor to notice the question and to compose an adequate reply. This is why it's essential to check your online classroom and your linked email frequently and to respond to queries promptly. You should post comments on student work within 48 hours of the due date and should grade their work within 48 hours of the end of the module, as well. Even more importantly, you should wait no longer than 24 hours to respond to an email or to a post in your course's "problems and solutions" or "questions for the professor" area. This is especially true if the student asks for information about how to complete an assignment, since a delay in your response means that they cannot post their work on time or correctly.

Email and course announcements are also essential. I typically send my online students an email just before the beginning of each week with reminders of due dates, helpful information about upcoming assignments, additional resources such as links to websites, and attachments such as study guides or templates for assignments. I might also address common problems or misconceptions that I've noticed cropping up in their work. I send a quick email to students after I've posted their grades for each assignment so that they can let me know if there are any problems. To simplify the task of weekly communication, I keep a file of the basic wording for these email messages and announcements. Then I only need to copy and paste into the course announcement page and into a group email, making any modifications necessary before sending or posting. This streamlines the process considerably.

If your course includes a discussion board component, students genuinely appreciate their instructor's engaged participation. Discussions are a valuable opportunity to provide individualized instruction and to share your own experience and disciplinary expertise with the group. Instructors with 20 or fewer students in the course should try to post a comment or reply to each of student in every required discussion. This is going above and beyond expectations, I know, but students notice the instructor's extra effort. However, if your course has more than 20 students, it might not be possible to comment on every post. In that case, your goal should be to respond to at least 20 students in the discussion overall, commenting on the posts where you notice a particularly good point being made, where you find you should address a misconception, or where you notice that students have not received any comments from their peers.

Online students are unfortunately prone to disappearing. Some just forget they registered for the class altogether, others become overwhelmed by the work involved, and a few lose track of the course in the day-to-day demands of their busy lives. When I notice that students have not been participating in the discussions, have missing assignments, or have not logged into the class in an unusually long time, I send them a friendly email reminder, and if that goes unanswered, I also contact their academic advisor.

Communicating and interacting with our online students requires us to be more deliberate and thoughtful than we might be on campus, where face-to-face interactions are a matter of routine. Nevertheless, the results are well worth it, realized through our students' success as online learners.