Quick Guide to Online Course Communication and Interaction

Why are Communication and Interaction Important?

- Are your students learning? How do you know?
- Do your student enjoy the course? How do you know?
- Do your students feel they can come to you or a TA with their questions and concerns? Are you sure about that?

Your answers to the questions above may range from "the results on the quizzes tell me how they are doing" to "it is up to the students to take responsibility for their learning." And really, the answer may depend upon the type of course and how it fits into the overall curriculum.

Research suggests that "social presence" is especially important in online courses as it helps to reduce student feelings of isolation. (Dixson) Creating a human connection comes fairly easily in a face-to-face class, but online instructors have to work at it. If you're not careful, you can find email taking over your life! This guide will provide you with some strategies to support social presence without filling up your inbox.

Student Participation

Provide students with clear and understandable expectations will help them succeed in the course.

Poor:

> ### Adobe Connect Participation and Attendance:
>
> Class attendance is crucial to your success in this course. The course policy for attendance and active participation is the following:
>
> Attendance and active participation equal to 5% of your final grade in this course. Once you miss 5 classes you will unfortunately lose all points awarded for attendance and participation. In addition your active participation in all class and online activities is required. Simply being a warm body is not sufficient.

What's wrong with this?

- There is too much text—would <u>you</u> read all of this?
- What does active participation entail?
  - This seems self-explanatory, right?
  - A student new to online learning probably needs more guidance

Better:

> ## Adobe Connect Participation and Attendance:
>
> - Comprises 5% of total grade
> - 5 or more missed classes = 0 attendance/participation points
> - Participation requirements:
>   - Contribute to discussion 5 times during each class
>   - Be prepared to answer questions about the day's topic
>   - Focus on the Adobe Connect session (close other computer windows)

Make Instructions Easy to Find!

Your well-written instructions are of no use if students can't find them!

- Include them in the assignment submission page
- If the instructions are too long, put them on a separate page or document and link to it
    - This strategy has the added benefit of being easy to update!
    - This makes it easy to include the directions in multiple locations

Student — Student Communication

Of course you want to communicate with your students! But you're teaching 500 students in one section! How can you possibly have meaningful communication with each student?

Remember that although students DO want to hear from you, interaction with their peers can also help to reduce feelings of isolation.

". . . active learning assignments, particularly discussion forums and web pages, may serve the secondary purpose of helping to develop students' social presence." (Dixson)
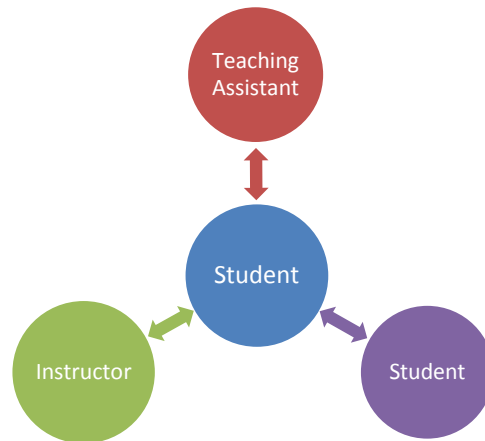
Student-Student Communication Examples

- Discussion boards
- Group assignments
- Peer review
- Video presentations
- Live chat

General Course Questions

Make it easy for students to answer each other's questions by providing a general "FAQ" or "Course Questions Discussion Forum." With such an open forum, students who have actually read the syllabus can tell other students where to find course policies.

- An FAQ Discussion allows you to answer a question for the entire class
  - This is like raising your hand in a face-to-face class
  - Students can use the search function to see if someone has already posted the question
- Remind students not to post personal or grade information
- Either the instructor or TA should check the FAQ Discussion Forum daily
  - You'll want to correct any inaccurate information that students post
  - If students do not get a speedy response, they'll go back to emailing questions
- Practice "tough love"
  - If a student asks a question that is answered in the syllabus or elsewhere, direct him/her to the location of the answer
  - Simply providing the answer trains students to come to you rather than referring to the material you have provided

A Message to Future Students

At the end of the term, invite your class to write or record a message to the next class to share tips on how to do well in the course. For some reason, students seem to be more willing to take advice from other students than their teachers!

Student — Faculty Communication

Students appreciate communication from and with their instructors. Any communication is a sign that you care about the student and how he/she is doing in your class. Audio and video recordings can be done within the assignment feedback and can be especially helpful in supporting social presence.

Instructors should provide STAR (specific, timely, actionable, respectful) feedback.

- Specific feedback targets areas for improvement AND areas of success
- Timely feedback arrives in time to support improvement before the next assessment or assignment
  - Tell students when they can expect to receive feedback
  - Send feedback as soon after the assignment as possible, before the student has forgotten what he/she did!
- Actionable feedback suggests ways to improve
- Respectful feedback avoids berating or belittling a student or their work

Poor Example:

8/10 good.

Better Example:

Your paragraph flowed well and covered all the important points needed in a thorough summary. Your APA formatting needs a little work please review the APA guidelines.

Tell students the timeframe they can expect for an email reply. A 24-hour turnaround is best, as you don't want to delay students in completing their work. But whatever your policy is, be sure to post it in a place where it can be easily found. And if something happens and you can't respond as per your policy, send out an announcement! *Frequent communication is the key to reducing student frustration!*

Automation

Make use of the Canvas option to provide feedback for quiz or self-test questions. People tend to remember things better if they have had to struggle to retrieve the information. (Roediger) Providing feedback on incorrect choices can be a helpful part of the learning process.

Have you ever had students come to you at the end of the semester to tell you that they didn't know that they were failing? Even in a large course, you can prompt students to look at the gradebook through an automatically graded quiz.

- Create a quiz with three questions:
    - Enter the grade you have earned thus far in the course (copied from the gradebook)
    - Are you happy with this grade?
    - If you are not happy with this grade, how do you plan to improve your course grade?
- With this short quiz, students have to LOOK at their course grade and at least acknowledge some responsibility for improvement

Set up reminder announcements to go out to your class at key times during the semester. You can schedule these before the semester starts, so that's one less thing you have to worry about!

Student — Instructor Feedback

Getting feedback from your students about what is working well—and perhaps not so well is pretty easy. Just ask them! A quick survey with one or two questions may do the trick. You can also ask for suggestions through the discussion forum.

- Make the survey anonymous to encourage honesty
- Keep the survey as short as possible
- Follow up on the information you receive

A survey early in the semester can help keep you from being blindsided with bad evaluations at the end of the term.

References

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