

# **The Relevance of Creative and Consistent Communication in the Online Learning Environment <sup>1</sup>**

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While online courses are not an entirely new concept, they are rapidly increasing as a popular way for some students to further their education. Because of the flexible schedules that allow students to “attend” classes at non-traditional times, and the ability to be able to somewhat self-pace their learning, students are turning to these alternative classes. However, there are issues that can impede the successful outcome of online courses, and one very common issue that leads to a less than satisfying online experience is in the area of communication. The communication between instructor and student and students with each other can be a challenging aspect of both taking a class online and teaching a class online. The lack of face-to-face interaction that exists in traditional classrooms is obviously the missing component to an online class. There are, however, creative communication methods that instructors can build into their online courses to balance out the lack of face-to-face interactions and provide a successful learning environment for students who are looking for alternate ways to attend classes.

## **Personal Perspective**

As an online student, I attend approximately three to four online classes each semester. With this personal perspective, I have witnessed how various instructors utilized the technologies available to communicate with their class. I have participated in a class where the instructor posted one announcement to “welcome” the students to their course along with their syllabus and weekly assignment list. This instructor provided an email address as the only way to communicate with her, and no peer interaction occurred throughout the duration of the course. Other classes were so communication intensive that keeping up with the pace became a daily chore. The instructor used email, discussion boards, chat, presentations, and phone calls to communicate with the students and the students were required to post discussions with one another almost daily. In both of the extremes mentioned, there were components that led to personal frustration as an online learner, and the only way to relate this to would be to liken either extreme to a face-to-face learning environment.

Consider this; you are a student attending a traditional class. You arrive to the first class and the instructor greets you, hands you a syllabus and the remainder of the semester he or she comes into the classroom, hands out an assignment and ignores you. The only way that you are able to ask a question is to write a note, and the instructor would respond when they had the time to do so. In the next extreme example, your instructor walks into the classroom and begins talking. He or she fills the remainder of the semester with constant chatter; lecturing; forming small groups; asking and answering questions; giving verbal presentations; and even more bizarre, the instructor expects you

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<sup>1</sup> *Interviewees' names have been changed to protect their privacy*

to come to class Monday through Friday when your class is scheduled to meet two days a week. Both are preposterous examples of teaching any class.

Teaching and learning in an online environment can be a successful endeavor. Although I have attended both of the aforementioned extreme examples in online classes, I have also attended highly satisfying and successful online classes; courses where instructors communicated using a variety of methods, yet not using so many methods as to frustrate and confuse the learning process.

### **Other Students' Perspectives**

Students have varying reasons for taking online courses. More often than not, the reason for taking online courses is the flexible schedule that this sort of class provides. When asked why one student takes online courses, online learner, Vance Horn claimed, "Sometimes online classes are the only types of courses that I can fit into my schedule" The most frustrating experience that Horn faced when taking an online class was the slow response time to his email inquires to the instructor (Horn, Personal Communication, April 27, 2004). Online learners expect communication by their instructor, and timely communication is always the most satisfying exchange. Online Biology instructor, James Adams, states that it is his personal policy is to respond to any inquiry within twenty-four hours (Adams, Personal Communication, April 26 2004).

Another online student, John Stead, stated that he would never take an online course again after a less-than satisfying communication experience. He explained that it became so difficult getting information from his online instructor, that he "felt like no one was on the other end". When questioned if he would reconsider taking an online course if he were assured that his instructor would communicate more frequently and be easier to communicate with, Stead said that he would try taking an online course again. "Taking online courses would help me to schedule my life easier, but I don't want to go through the hassle of waiting days to be able to get my questions answered" (Stead, Personal Communication, April 27, 2004).

The lack of consistent communication is certainly frustrating to students who attend online classes, and on the other side of the learning process are the instructors. How do successful online instructors strike a balance of effective communication in the online classroom environment, without overdoing it or taking excessive amounts of time to do so?

### **Communicating Online**

The successful communication balance lies in the tools utilized by each online instructor. Each online instructor is unique and instructs their students in a manner that is appropriate for the course taught. Just as a student would never expect to walk into a classroom and see the same pedagogy in every class that they attend, no online learner expects a certain style of instruction while taking an online class. However, when an instructor fails to utilize the communication tools available to them in the most appropriate manner, students do become frustrated and this leads to impeded learning and high attrition.

#### **Email**

The use of email in an online class is almost inevitable. Using email to send greetings, course updates, project information, and receive and transfer documents to and from students is a great way to communicate. However, is it enough? Should instructors limit the flow of information between themselves and students to the use of email? What problems can this create in an online class?

Using email alone is not enough. Servers fail, multiple inquiries become tedious exchanges, messages fall through the cracks, and communication through written exchange can be a difficult process for both instructor and student. Sometimes an issue is too complex to explain in an email, and the likely hood of being misunderstood is apparent. Without the use of verbal inflection, body language, and facial expressions, what one writes in an email may be misconstrued. In the book Teaching Online, A Practical Guide, the author states that, “Most of us rely on body language to deflect the impact of what we say; we convey our true intentions through gestures and vocal intonation. The absence of these conventions sometimes causes students real distress” (Ko, S. and Rossen, S., 2004, 182). This distress can lead to a frustrating exchange of more and more emails in an attempt to clarify a point taking valuable teaching and learning time from both instructor and student.

### **Discussion Boards**

In the asynchronous discussion board environment, students and teachers can post messages to one another and wait for the exchange of information to take place. The use of this communication method is a terrific way for instructors and students to exchange ideas on class topics. For example, in the class Visual Communications taught by Professor Mitchell Mann in an online course from Arizona State University, the class would read a section of a text or other source and write a response to it on the discussion board. The response postings were helpful to promote understanding on various levels. Each student provided information that perhaps another student would not have gained from reading the same text. The exchange of ideas and varying viewpoints from all learners is a creative way for students to understand that there are many sides to one topic therefore promoting a deeper critical learning process.

Discussion boards can also become debate boards or personal platforms if not closely monitored by the instructor. In one online class, student George Campo, states that one classmate monopolized the discussion board by posting so many personal opinions and derogatory comments that other students in the online class stopped posting altogether (Campo, Personal Communication, April 17, 2004). Setting guidelines for posting on class boards is then crucial for the successful exchanging of ideas to occur. In Mann’s online class, he very clearly states in his course outline, “The only aspect of this course that is *not* negotiable is the requirement that you always demonstrate respect for your classmates and colleagues...No “flaming” will be tolerated, ever, not even once; i.e., no antagonistic messages posted to your classmates and colleagues” (Mann, 2004). By making this very clear in his course expectations and by having students reply by sending an acceptance of the course requirements via memo in the first week

of class, the discussions in this online class always remained positive and productive.

### **Chat Rooms**

Synchronous chat environments utilized in online classes can be one of the closest methods of interaction to that of a face-to-face exchange. Knowing that the person or people who you are chatting with are interacting live is a great way to communicate in an online class. Online chats can be a way for groups of students to collaborate ideas and projects. While working on a group project for a technical communications class, a group that I was involved in used the live chat environment for weekly meetings to ensure that the progress on our group project was on schedule and to discuss issues such as assigning tasks, developing ideas, and gaining understanding of processes. This became a very important communication tool by allowing our group to build a website entirely online without once having face-to-face interaction.

The downside of using chat in online classes can be the misunderstanding and clarification process that is missing due to the lack of facial expressions, body language, and vocal tone. Too many people chatting at one time are another way that chat sessions can be counterproductive. When too many people are chatting at once this leads to confusion and breakout discussions that are irrelevant and sometimes off topic.

### **Telephone**

Online instructor, Adams, utilizes the telephone to communicate with his students. When it seems that a student misunderstands a course instruction, or if he does not “hear” from a student in a few days, he picks up the telephone and calls them. He claims that, “If students remain engaged, e-communication is efficient and nearly always adequate”. However, Adams expresses that nothing replaces the personal nature of a live voice on the other end of the phone. This type of communication is an effective way to encourage and instruct students (Adams, Personal Communication, April 26, 2004).

### **Mail**

The postal service is another effective way of communicating in an online class. When exchanging projects in a creative manner, students and instructors can choose to utilize more than the current high-tech tools alone. Students can be encouraged to think outside of the box and use technologies that have worked for many years.

Another example of this type of creative process of communicating in an online class came from Mann’s Technical Communications class. Mann challenged the students to present a project to describe their technological autobiographies, and the students were required to use a creative method to submit their projects to the instructor; no file attachments accepted. As a student, I decided to send a CD of a photo story describing my technological journey.

This was a creative and fun process, and the only drawback to utilizing the postal service was the time that it took to send and receive the project.

### **Videoconferencing**

Using videoconferencing in online courses is something that will increase over the next years. With the rapid advancements of technology and the decreasing costs of using video capabilities, students and instructors will be able to connect to the world in a unique way. Guest speakers from a country far away can present ideas and discussions to students never exposed to other cultures. The Global Nomads Group discussed in the article *Global Nomads Group Relies on Videoconferencing to Connect Students Worldwide*, that students who connect with other students from other cultures have an exchange that is “just as powerful as the students physically meeting each other” (DiGiorgio, February 2004, 8). The use of videoconferencing can also become a tool that will assist online instructors and student to communicate more effectively.

### **Online Presentations**

Utilizing PowerPoint, websites, interactive tutorials, and film clips in online learning environments allows both instructors and students to present ideas, lessons, and interact in ways that static materials do not allow. Virtual Autopsy sites such as [www.hbo.com/autopsy](http://www.hbo.com/autopsy) are assisting medical and nursing students to learn anatomy and physiology. Using the slideshow software PowerPoint aids the art instructor to present art from all over the world to his or her class. Cinematography students can watch clips of films to gain understanding of perspective when shooting films. Interactive tutorials and courseware provide testing of concepts with instant feedback of the students’ level of understanding. Each academic and artistic discipline has technological tools available to help communicate course content that can otherwise be lost when face-to-face interaction is missing.

### **Conclusion**

Using technological tools to communicate in the online educational environment is a way for instructors to instruct their students in a dynamic and creative manner. By using a variety of well-chosen communicative methods, instructors can provide a successful learning environment where students learn, thrive, connect, and feel valued as an individual learner.

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