

Best Practices for Communicating With Students Online

Beginning in the early 2000s and continuing today, the rate at which non-traditional students enroll in postsecondary institutions has been steadily rising. This phenomenon, in part, fuels the need for distance learning opportunities. Moreover, given the state of education amid a global crisis, there seems to be no end in sight for distance education. For many professors, that means finding ways to engage in meaningful communication with students who they might never see or hear in person. Teaching in this way can be especially difficult when it comes to asynchronous learning.

Communicating with students is one of the most difficult skills to master. Sometimes, professors say too much. Other times, they do not say quite enough. Both situations lead to a breakdown in communication that can be discouraging and frustrating. When instructors perfect their communication style, they can facilitate meaningful conversations with students and make a difference in student engagement and success. This article suggests a few practical ways to engage in meaningful communication with online students.

1. Schedule weekly announcements. When you update your class at the beginning of the term, add “schedule weekly announcements” to your task list. Recommended announcements include a welcome statement, due date reminders, and out-of-office notices. Release the welcome announcement about a week before the term begins. Not only does it serve as a reminder to students that they are enrolled in a class, but it also gives them time to mentally prepare for what is to come. Due date reminders may be set for a time that you deem appropriate. I have found that releasing a reminder three days before an assignment is due allows students time to complete an assignment if they had not already done so.

Consider posting two types of out-of-office announcements: One message for campus closures and one for reoccurring times of unavailability. Check your college academic calendar for holiday and break closures. Determine the relevant dates and include closure announcements in your course. I include weekly out-of-office announcements that contain information that students need reminding of over the weekend. I refer to them as “weekend wind down announcements.” Schedule releases for the end of your workday, on the day that ends your workweek. Composing announcements may take a bit of time, but after you have completed them for one term, you only need to copy them for subsequent terms, adjusting dates accordingly.

2. Welcome students. Before the term begins, send a welcome announcement to your entire class. Do this through your learning management system or email. First, be positive. Tell students how much you appreciate having them in class. Second, be inspiring. Remind students that they have everything they need to succeed, but if they find themselves falling short, they have you to help aid them in their success. Finally, be exciting. Tell students how much they are going to learn and grow by engaging in the course material. Keep the message short, but be sure to tell students when and how to get started on coursework.

3. Host a meet and greet. I usually choose the start of the second week of the term to host a virtual meeting where students can pop in to say hello and ask questions. You may also use this time to review the basic structure of the course and to address those things students want to know most: How you will grade assignments, when you will grade assignments, and if you will accept late assignments. Although it is not my practice to offer extra credit for attendance, doing so may increase participation. If you decide to host a meet and greet, consider adding this information in your welcome announcement and creating a separate scheduled announcement to increase participation.

4. Send an initial recorded message. Once you have completed your first round of grading, send students a recorded message that encourages them to persist. Let students know that even if they had not performed as they hoped, they can still successfully complete the course. Remind them of your desire to see them succeed and your availability to help them do so.

5. Check in weekly. At the start of every work week, message students to ask how they are progressing. While the grade book will give you some clues, this simple act assures students that you care, provides an opportunity for them to ask questions, and nudges them to stay focused.

6. Schedule virtual meetings as necessary or desired. When you notice students struggling, or if students tell you that they are struggling, offer to meet with them virtually. At the point of inquiry, ask students to provide you a list of possible meeting days and times. The proposed meeting days and times may not always work, but having them is a good start.

7. Create videos and/or audio files. Not every student inquiry requires a one-on-one meeting. Sometimes a written response will suffice. However, there may be times when showing or telling may be the best option. When

preparing your class, you have likely laid out everything that students need to succeed. Still, some may overlook or misunderstand information. Creating a video or audio file offers not only the obvious benefit of answering students' questions, but also the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback in a personalized message. Moreover, depending on the topic, a written explanation may take 20 minutes to draft, while a recorded explanation may take only five. When you are inundated with questions, every minute counts. As an additional note, providing audio feedback when delivering bad news helps to minimize its impact. An audio message helps to clarify how you are feeling or what you are thinking. If students can hear genuine care in your voice, then both parties can move beyond the situation.

The above tips are vital for laying a strong foundation for meaningful communication with online students. With the inclusion of the additional steps listed below, you will see your online learning community not just succeed, but flourish.

8. Answer messages as soon as possible. Answering messages during your established work schedule allays the pressure to answer messages when you are out of the office. It bears mentioning that "as soon as possible" is not the same as "when you feel like it." (I am admonishing myself here, too.) Responding to students must be a priority. If you feel a bit short, your message can be short. A response such as, "I received your message. Give me until X to provide a detailed response," is enough to let students know you have not forgotten them and to give yourself a recovery period.

9. Provide feedback on assignments. In addition to basic grading (marking things correct or incorrect), students sometimes want personalized feedback. Here is a tip: Find a single talking point and highlight that point in your feedback. For instance, if a student showed their work on every math problem, even if a few answers were incorrect, talk about it. If on a written assignment a student stays on topic, provides original insight, uses correct English grammar, or maintains a cohesive flow, focus on one of those things. The point is to tell students what they did well, provide insight for improvement, and open the door for reteaching.

One final tip when giving feedback is to refer to students by name. It is a personal touch that leaves students believing they are seen and heard.

10. Maintain a positive tone. Angry and frustrated students can become negative and cruel. In most cases, it is best to address academic issues only. For instance, a student who is displeased with a grade may complain about how unfair an assignment is, or how incompetent you are. Your response, if warranted, should reframe the assignment, restate the requirements of the assignment, reveal where the correct information can be found, and reaffirm your commitment to the student's success.

11. Set boundaries. The pressure to be available all day, every day, is very real, but it is also unreasonable. You must make time to recharge from the stress of being a professor. Tell students when you will and will not be available, and for your own sake, stick to your schedule.

12. Allow students to take ownership of their learning experiences. Avoid the trap of investing time and effort in things that students themselves can resolve. Within reason, do what you can to help students navigate and successfully complete your class. For matters that fall outside your subject area, refer students to reliable sources. For instance, it is okay to refer students to technical support if they have technical problems in your course. Remember, your purpose is to teach and facilitate.

Incorporating even one of these methods will bolster communication with online students. There will likely still be students who do not respond to any of your efforts. Notwithstanding, the key is to clear the lines of communication by making yourself available. The more consistent you are, the more engaged students become.

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