Communicating Online

Overview

In an online course, instructors and students can communicate with each other in various ways. The following information is an overview of the types of communication that take place online and important things to remember about how you communicate.

Objectives

Upon completion of this module, you will be able to:

- Identify the differences between synchronous and asynchronous communication
- Use appropriate online netiquette

Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication

Synchronous and asynchronous are two types of online communication. In Blackboard, synchronous and asynchronous communication occurs in many of the learning tools, like discussion forums, instant messaging, chat, blogs. These tools play an integral part in bringing the human element into the online classroom as a means to build community and exchange information.

Synchronous Communication

Synchronous communication occurs at the same time (real time) but in different places. A telephone is an example of synchronous communication. Other examples include AOL Instant Messenger, MSN Messenger, video conferencing, Chat, and Whiteboard. You may be accustomed to using some of these tools to communicate with friends and family outside an educational setting.

Because synchronous communication involves being online during a specific time frame, your instructor will most likely inform you in advance of a scheduled communication session. He or she may give you a question to consider before the session or assign you to a small group that you will be communicating with in the session. Your instructor may also open up the synchronous communication tool for less structured events, such as online office hours or small group activities.

Asynchronous Communication

Asynchronous communication occurs at different times and in different places allowing you to communicate at your convenience rather than in real time. Asynchronous activities allow each voice to be heard, whether you are participating in a small group or large group activity. Some of the Blackboard tools that students can use for asynchronous communication include Course Messages, Discussions, and Blogs.
Netiquette

Although you might be accustomed to using forms of electronic communication, such as text messaging and chat, communicating as part of a course involves a slightly different set of skills and conventions commonly referred to as “netiquette.” Netiquette covers a set of core rules for proper online behavior.

Online Communication Guidelines

Following netiquette is the first step to successfully communicating with your classmates and instructor online. The tips below will give you some more ideas for getting to know your online classmates as well as those that sit next to you in the classroom.

- **Read carefully** - Because an online course relies so much on written material, many folks have difficulty resisting the impulse to merely skim discussion postings. Because this can lead to misunderstandings, read discussion posts carefully, and read them twice.

- **Use subject lines** - Use subject lines in your messages to keep the communication flow going. Be sure to change the subject line if you are changing the direction of the discussion.

- **Log on frequently** - Be sure to check Discussions or Course Mail every other day or a minimum of five days a week. In a course that uses these two tools, messages can build up and become overwhelming.

- **Think through ideas** - In most online courses, meaningful and thoughtful participation is essential. Many instructors encourage students to write discussion forum entries in word processing programs before submitting them.

- **Write meaningful responses** - When communicating in Discussions, you might be tempted to respond to a message with “Okay” or “I agree.” These responses add little to the conversation. Your instructor might also have a list of “discussion forum guidelines” that set expectations regarding the length and content required for your messages.

- **Avoid using all capital letters** as it can give the impression that you are shouting. If you want to emphasize a point, use asterisks around a word.

- **Avoid personal attacks**, called “flaming.” If you read a message that you suspect might be a personal attack, resist the temptation to fire off a response. Instead, let your response sit before sending or request that your instructor resolve the situation.

- **Avoid offensive language or comments** that attack the writer of the comment rather than his or her argument.

Emoticons

In addition to observing netiquette and online communication guidelines, many learners will convey emotion by using a combination of characters called emoticons. Avoid overusing them or using them in situations that call for more formal writing. In general, emoticons will be inappropriate for academic assignments. Consult your instructor before using them in your online communication.

- **Smile**: Type a colon, a dash (optional), and a closing parenthesis. :-)  
- **Wink**: Type a semi-colon, a dash (optional), and a closing parenthesis. ;-)  
- **Frown**: Type a colon, a dash (optional), and an opening parenthesis. :(  
- **Surprised**: Type a colon, a dash (optional), and a zero or o. :-(o  
- **Indifferent**: Type a colon, a dash (optional), and a slash. :-|