

Communicating with Students Online: A Guide for Developing an Online Communication Plan

Aim:

Develop an online communication plan for an online course based on:

- Alignment between your course design, your teaching roles and the needs of students in the paper.
- A timeline-based plan for activity within the study period.

Considerations:

- Teacher-student communication plays a critical role in student satisfaction and learning.
- Online communication takes many forms: text, multimedia, visuals and audio, or a combination.
- Online communication can be asynchronous or synchronous (real time).
- Communication online is a learned skill. Effective online communication takes practice and effort to achieve, but it gets easier with experience.

Form an online communication plan:

- Be clear about how your online communication supports your aim and approach to teaching in the course.
 - What role does online communication play in your approach to teaching? What sorts of communication do the course activities require?
 - What levels of communication (feedback, encouragement, interaction) do students require?
 - What levels of communication (feedback, encouragement, interaction) do students expect? How can those expectations be met (or managed)?
- Be explicit about expectations, and be vigilant about them.
 - Be clear and explicit about what students can expect from you.
 - Establish protocols for student - teacher interaction via email, discussions and other channels.

- Establish expectations for student - student interaction, where required.
- Create an environment that supports your plan.
 - Make communication purposeful. ○ Structure the environment to support productive communication. ○ Create a safe and welcoming social atmosphere.
 - Model your expected communications and be consistent in your online communication (practice what you preach). ○ Manage online communication: Insist on standards of behaviour/protocols consistent with your communication plan.

Cultivate an online teaching presence:

- Be visibly present online.
 - Establish your online presence early. ○ Continue to maintain and cultivate your online presence.
 - Be real, be yourself.
- Be available for interaction. Your online teaching presence is more than just 'being there'. It is also about being available for interaction.
 - Be responsive. This provides learners with timely feedback, as well as reassures learners that they are not alone or off-track.
 - Responses take many forms: Answering questions, providing feedback, asking questions, suggesting possibilities, acknowledging good ideas, and providing encouragement.
 - Manage interactions. Use one-to-many communications strategically in combination with one-to-few or one-to-one communications.
- Be the teacher. Exhibit common 'teacher' roles. Or clearly indicate which roles you will play and which roles students will be asked to play. For example:
 - Manage the online environment. ○ Be knowledgeable and authoritative about course content and processes.
 - Arbitrate disputes. ○ Consider what can be prepared in advance and what must be done 'on the fly'.

Actively develop your online communication skills as part of your online teaching:

- Use a variety of communications tools. Aim for 'fit for purpose'.

- Know your communication tools, how they work and when to use them. Don't ask students to use tools which you cannot use. ○ Introduce new tools to your repertoire on a small scale. Give yourself time to develop your abilities with new tools.
- When using open channels (e.g. blogs, public wikis) avoid posting content which could be viewed as offensive. When in doubt, use a closed channel (e.g. emails and closed discussion forums).
- Be aware of genre, style and tone in your online communication.
 - Use names and other social cues to personalise messages.
 - Develop your ability to read/interpret the nuances of student messages based on the tone and voice students use. • Learn to manage online communication.
 - Use student-student interaction strategically: Encourage peer support. ○ Use FAQs to minimize individual Q&A. ○ Provide written study notes and support students' use of them.
 - Use groups strategically to manage the quantity and quality of online discussion.
- Seek feedback from students on your online communication.

[Link communication planning to course activity:](#)

- Make communication purposeful and link them to the course activities.
- What sorts of communication do the course learning activities require?
 - Learning tasks? ○ Assessment tasks? ○ Feedback?
 - Student support?
- What sorts of communication does teaching the course require?
 - What (communicative) teaching tasks need to be performed regularly? ○ What teaching tasks are performed as one-offs? Special cases?
 - Beginning of the course? ○ Assessments? ○ End of the course?

[Additional altLAB resources to help you forming your communication plan:](#)

[Tools for Communicating with Students Online](#)

[Basic Approaches to Communicating with Students Online](#)