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5 Tips for Effective Online Teacher-Student Communication

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George Bernard Shaw, recipient of the 1925 Noble Prize in Literature and award-winning Irish playwright, famously said: “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” As I reflect back on my years of online instruction, I confess: I’ve made this mistake. I often assumed that students understood a post, an email, or a video I’ve made when they did not. Harder still is letting students know that the instructor is “on their side” and wishes their every success. Born from trial and error, here are my top 5 suggestions on the most effective ways for teachers to communicate with students online.

1. Make first contact and do it early

The worst mistake I think I ever made was sending my greetings to students on the first day of class. It’s too late. Students need a few days to get a sense of the course, read the syllabus, ask questions, and carve sacred space in their busy schedules for the hours they need to study. Trying to do all these things and start on the first module when the term begins never works out well.

Instead, I contact students weeks before the beginning of classes. I make a video introduction so they can see and hear that I’m a “live” person. In the video (a short 2-3 minutes), I give my greetings, say something about myself, share a vision of the course and why it’s important, and keep “business matters” to a minimum.

Strategically, I set up a pre-class orientation module for the students to work through *prior to* the start of class. There they see the assignments at a glance and get a walk-through of the course shell. When the term officially begins, they are ready to jump into the first module.

2. Have office hours every week and make them consistent

In an age when using Zoom, Big Blue Button, Skype, or other video conferencing tools is not only convenient but free, I recommend setting up regular office hours when a student can count on a specific day and time each week that you are online to “meet.”

I send out a Doodle poll early so students can indicate their free hours in a given week. I try to pick two 1-hour time slots when most students can join. Then every week, I’m online in Zoom or Big Blue Button waiting for students to drop into the video conferencing session. While I wait, I can grade, write emails, and get tasks done. But as soon as a person enters the session, I drop everything and we talk. Someone almost always shows up.

Office hours assure the student that the instructor is available and present. It lets students know you want to help. It also gives me a pulse of how students are doing. Are they drowning in, or sailing through, each module? Meeting them through office hours is a quick reality check

3. Receive advice and implement suggestions when you can

At times, students have great suggestions. It may be the case that the suggestion cannot be implemented right away, but if it can be done, I try to do it. It could be as simple as extending a deadline on a particularly tough assignment or providing samples of good bibliographies. Whatever the suggestion, implementing it gives a needed sense of ownership to my students

4. If you make a mistake, don’t be afraid to admit it and offer a fair resolution

I remember one time when I was not informed that more than half my class would be taking a week off in the semester to attend a conference sponsored by my seminary’s denomination. There was no way these students could attend the conference and complete the next module. I saw no way forward but to contact each student and apologize for not incorporating the conference in the class schedule. I talked with academic services and with their help adjusted the course to accommodate the conference week. I dropped one major assessment. It was messy but the students were graciously cooperative. Whew!

5. Keep it positive

Students get discouraged easily. If they are feeling the course is too hard, we work out a plan to move forward, whether it’s extra tutoring or adjusting study habits. The most important thing is to keep it positive. Hope inspires perseverance. Perseverance is what we all need to succeed.

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