



## Best Practices for Encouraging Instructor/Student Communication and Partnerships in Online Learning

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## Best Practices for Encouraging Instructor/Student Communication and Partnerships in Online Learning

**Amanda W. Joyce, Jennifer Morrison, Tanya Romero-González, and Martin Kane**

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*When students and instructors communicate well, students' GPAs, GRE scores, educational engagement, personal development, and satisfaction with their learning experience all improve. Similarly, when instructors are transparent in their course decisions and involve students as partners in their education, student retention, academic sense of belonging, student-instructor interactions, and networking opportunities all improve. However, face-to-face techniques for student/instructor communication, like informal before-class conversations or in-class question-and-answer sessions about assignments, can be challenging to implement in an online environment. The purpose of this piece is to discuss evidence-based strategies for improving transparency and communication in an online learning environment.*

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When students and instructors communicate outside of the classroom, students' GPAs, GRE scores, educational engagement, personal development, and satisfaction with their learning experience all improve (Nadler & Nadler, 2000). Even a simple email, sent strategically, can improve the student learning experience (Hassini, 2006). Similarly, when instructors discuss the learning goals and the reasoning behind grades earned on assessments, or are otherwise transparent in their course decisions, student retention and academic sense of belonging both improve (Winkelmes, 2013; Winkelmes et al., 2016). Newer research has focused on how students and instructors can work together as partners in their education, which can improve the frequency of student-instructor interactions as well as increase networking opportunities (Schwartz et al., 2017; Souers et al., 2007).

However, many of the tried-and-true techniques that instructors have historically used to encourage positive instructor-student communication and partnerships in the face-to-face classroom, such as informal before-class conversations with students or in-class question-and-answer sessions about assignments, can be challenging to implement in an online environment. Perhaps as a result, students

perceive online courses as offering fewer opportunities for interaction with their instructors, and, unlike face-to-face learners, online students struggle to describe ways in which discussion contributes to their learning (Mather et al., 2018; Platt et al., 2014).

The purpose of this piece is to allow for discussion of strategies for improving transparency, communication, and instructor-student partnerships in an online learning environment. We will explore ways in which instructors can do this through explicit means of communication, but also through course organization and the appropriate grading and framing of assignments. The suggestions were inspired by conversations held by the authors of this paper while engaged in a semester-long teaching circle on best practices in online teaching as well as conversations held during a presentation on this topic during the 2020 Kentucky Pedagogicon. The authors of this paper teach at a mid-sized teaching-focused university with both undergraduate and graduate enrollment, but we believe that the strategies here can effectively improve student-instructor communication across a wide variety of institutions.

## **A Community of Inquiry**

The Community of Inquiry Model emphasizes the importance of establishing cognitive, social, and teaching presences in the online classroom and shows how a well-established community can lead to desirable student outcomes such as students' engagement in problem solving and their belief that the internet can be an appropriate medium from which they can receive their education (see Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007 for review). We believe that a community of inquiry is very well supported by transparency in course decisions, communication among students and instructors, and the forging of strong student-instructor partnerships. Thus, we explore strategies for strengthening each of these to the benefit of students and instructors alike.

## **Strategies for Strengthening Community**

### ***Explicit Contact with Students***

Now, perhaps more than ever before, students and instructors have a wide variety of mediums through which they can contact one another. They can email, they can communicate through private messages or announcements on their learning management system (LMS), they can video chat through services like Zoom or Google Meet, they can speak through the telephone or Google Voice, and

they can set up these interactions on any of a number of scheduling apps. The opportunities are beneficial in that they can reduce student anxiety and feelings of isolation and improve the learning experience (Hassini, 2006; Reagan, 2018; Yao et al., 2017). Yet, students who are faced with a number of new technologies can also become overwhelmed and disheartened, particularly when provided with too many choices (Fose & Mehl, 2007; Mangan, 2017; McBrien et al., 2009).

A simple way around this is for instructors to provide students with many ways in which they can be reached, but to also specify preferences for this contact (“You may reach me through Zoom, Facetime, or phone, but I am most responsive via email.”). Instructors should also specify their available times and their expected turnaround time for communication (“I check email once in the morning and once in the evening. Students can expect responses within two business days.”). Research shows that students prefer to communicate through emails and course announcements (Chang et al., 2015). They also find it helpful when instructors are able to respond to emails within 24-48 hours, and this timeliness predicts their success in the course (Martin et al., 2018; Miller, 2012).

### ***Considering Tone***

Instructors, too, can become overwhelmed in the many communication mediums available. As such, many prefer to communicate through means of mass distribution such as course announcements, course discussion boards, or mass emails (Joyce, 2020). When communicating with students, particularly in this more impersonal format, it is important to consider tone. When instructors communicate with a friendlier tone, they are perceived as being more approachable, and this tone can improve students’ perceptions of community and can motivate them to continue within a course or program (Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Rubel & Wallace, 2010). Instructors may wish to further encourage this friendly tone by letting students see their face. Video, rather than text, announcements in a course can improve social connectedness in a course (Miller et al., 2019).

Instructors should also consider the potential for student reticence in communication. Student engagement is encouraged by instructors who indicate their desire and willingness to help students (Gasiewski et al., 2012). Instructors should state this desire early and often and should reassure and encourage students who overcome their fears in order to reach out.

## ***Course Organization Strategies***

One way instructors can remind students of this desire to help is through course organization. Instructors should clearly provide their contact information in an easily-accessible location. By placing this information front and center on a course home page, in a first module in an LMS, or in an otherwise overtly visible location, instructors communicate to students their willingness to help them through difficulties. An organized course can also communicate to students an instructor's thought processes and priorities in learning. Students prefer courses that are easy and intuitive to navigate (Jaggers & Xu, 2016; Tudor, 2006). There are a number of ways to successfully organize a course. Perhaps instructors less familiar with technology may wish to organize an LMS into modules with clear headings that match course learning objectives or sections of material that were laid out in the syllabus. More technology-proficient instructors may wish to further organize their courses with modules containing pages, buckets, tabs, and more. That said, instructors should not overwhelm themselves in technologies in which they are not yet fluent, because errors in course design (broken links, etc.) can be a barrier to student learning (Muilenburg & Berg, 2005).

## ***Creating, Framing, and Grading Assignments***

The way in which assignments are framed and graded can also encourage a sense of community and partnership in the online classroom. Instructors may wish to allow students autonomy in the assignments that they choose to complete. In fact, 36% of students who are offered a "cafeteria-style" selection of assignments are so encouraged that they will choose to complete a higher number of assignments than is required to earn an A in the course (Hanewicz et al., 2017). When it is not possible to offer an excess of assignments, instructors can also encourage student autonomy within pre-established assignments. For example, in a psychology course, they may be asked to write about how an aspect of human nature discussed in class can be demonstrated within their favorite television show or movie. This opportunity for personal connection can improve student motivation and learning (Abrahamson, 2011).

Regardless of the level of autonomy offered in an assignment, instructors should take care when framing each assignment to meticulously describe to students why they are asking them to complete the assignment, how it fits in with their learning objectives, and how students can benefit from the assignment. Such transparency in teaching can provide students with purpose and motivation in the course and can improve student learning (Anderson et al., 2013; Winkelmes, 2013).

Care should also be taken when providing feedback on student assignments. Students receiving negative feedback may feel hurt or angry about this feedback, and this can be discouraging to the point that it is detrimental to their course performance (Bean, 2011; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). These perceived slights might also close a door for communication between instructor and student. Instructors, then, would do well to consider framing feedback in a positive tone that encourages students to reach out for further assistance. They may even consider alternative feedback mediums, such as audio or video feedback, that would allow them to communicate a tone that is not as well communicated in writing. Indeed, students indicate that these sorts of multimedia comments allow them to better interpret inflection, and they prefer multimedia feedback to text-based feedback (Nemec & Ditzner, 2016; Nielson, 2016).

### ***Encouraging Student-Student Interactions***

The above has focused on encouraging instructor-student communication, but student-student interactions are also helpful to students. In fact, interactions through discussion boards or blogs can enhance a community of inquiry and encourage learning (Buckley et al., 2005; Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005). Best practices suggest that instructors should also be active in these student-student interactions, monitoring for incivility or misconceptions, and responding to approximately 1/3 of student posts (Indiana University, n.d.).

### **Conclusions**

There are innumerable benefits to students to having responsive instructors with whom they can communicate. When students feel as if they are partners in their educational experience, they are more invested in this experience and they have better educational outcomes. While it can sometimes be challenging to encourage open communication in an online learning environment, advancing technologies have made it possible for instructors to build strong relationships with students who they may never meet in person. We have outlined above a number of strategies, ranging from explicit communication to more nuanced course organization or pedagogy, that can be conducive to the student-instructor partnership and we encourage online instructors to consider implementing some of these techniques to the benefit of their students.

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