Communicating with Online Students

The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it.

Edward R. Murrow

When people communicate face-to-face, most of the message is communicated through body language, facial expression and tone. Communication experts estimate that words make up only 7% of the message in face-to-face conversation (Mehrabian, 1981). It’s easy to see how written messages can easily be misunderstood or cause offense. In a recent survey of online students, 60% reported having one or more instances of miscommunication with their instructor (Visser & Visser, 2005). Instructors and students need to adjust their communication style to an online environment to minimize student-teacher miscommunication.

Build rapport early. Communication is most effective between people who feel personally connected to one another. Post an instructor bio and photo—and require students to do so, as well. Take time for an icebreaker early in the semester.

Set the tone of each message with the first sentence. Start with a positive or friendly statement, especially if you need to deliver bad news, such as a low grade. Too direct of a start and your audience is more likely to reject your ideas and become defensive.

Less is more. Students are more likely to read short messages. Use as few words as possible to get your meaning across clearly. Reread messages and try to pare them down to half their original length.

Be careful when using humor. Sarcasm is especially dangerous. If you are making a joke, make it clear with a :) or (joke!).

Keep communications cool and objective. Never send an email when you are angry. Conflict is extremely difficult to resolve online. Besides, a heated response is a permanent document that you may regret.

Have an online discussion about online communication. Compare it with face-to-face communication. Discuss personal experiences of miscommunication in this environment. Share online communication strategies and create activities that allow students to practice them.

Comment on unprofessional/uncivil language and style when you see it. Pinpoint specifically what is not professional or appropriate, i.e., word choice, spelling, tone. Focus on how colleagues, employers or classmates might respond to it.

Model effective communication. Example: In response to a student complaint: I’m glad you have expressed your concerns. I’m sorry that you feel the course isn’t meeting your needs. Since it’s too late to withdraw, I suggest that you focus on how to make this a productive experience for you from here on out. I will try to assist you as best I can.

Move beyond the plain written word. Use HTML tags to emphasize important words and space/indentation to show organization. These strategies make messages easy to scan for key ideas. Don’t forget the whiteboard and audio tool for critiques.

Sources:
