Chapter 7
Communicating with Students in Online Environments: Using Tools to Communicate, Monitor, and Provide Feedback to your Online Students

Katrina Woolsey Jordan
Grambling State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to outline technological tools and techniques instructors can use in order to be successful in their communications with students in virtual environments thus increasing instructor productivity and efficiency as well as student success. Instructors must communicate effectively in the following areas: assignments and due dates; inactivity, missing assignments, and/or failing grades; and feedback to guide learning. The instructor must also be willing to communicate in creative ways by using various technological tools including apps and social media. Online tools and techniques covered include: discussion boards; online charts; assignments; presentations; spreadsheets, math engines, and other calculation software.

INTRODUCTION

Communicating with students in online environments can be a daunting task. In order for the virtual environment to feel authentic, the instructor must use all of the electronic tools available to make sure that students are aware of what is expected of them. The instructor also needs to be creative in his/her communications in order to help support 21st century students stay on track and feel like they are not learning in a vacuum. According to the International Education Advisory Board (2008), teachers of 21st century student must bear in mind that: Their students “…like to be in control…like choice…are group-oriented and social…are inclusive…are practiced users of digital technology…think differently…are more likely to take risks…(and) value time off because they view life as uncertain.” The Board suggests that in order to teach these millennials, teachers must restructure the curricula and be trained in the technologies which they hope to use with their students. An effective teacher of an online course must communicate

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the curricula through thoughtful communications with students using their advanced technology skills. Communications should not only provide feedback, but also help students understand that they are not anonymous, but are part of a community of learners. Online instructors should evaluate the tools that they incorporate using feedback gathered from students and student achievement data from the course to guide future use of the tools in their courses. With creativity and a willingness to step outside of their comfort zone, communicating with students in online environments can be effective and rewarding.

The goals of this chapter are to:

1. Introduce the reader to various forms of technological tools typically accessed by students in online courses,
2. Explain how each tool may be used to connect with students and be leveraged for student success, and
3. Review strategies to promote the instructor’s online presence and communication activity in a manner that is both productive and efficient.

By the end of this chapter, readers will better understand the value of various technological tools for the purpose of communication in online learning and recognize how to implement such technology effectively in their courses. The ability to effectively engage students using communication structured using technology will allow faculty an increased capacity to connect with students cognitively and affectively; thus increasing instructor productivity and efficiency.

**BACKGROUND**

Although teaching in online environments is a relatively new component of meeting the needs of students, it is based on the same theories upon which all effective instruction is built. The theoretical base for effectively teaching online can be found in Behaviorism (Skinner, 1936; Bandura & Walters, 1963), Constructivism (Piaget, 1936; Bruner, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978), Universal Design for Learning (Anne Meyer, Rose, Gordon, 2013) and other theories of human learning and development. These learning theories support online learning by reinforcing behavior (Behaviorism), asking questions and promoting inquiry (Constructivism), and using multiple representations to promote conceptual understanding (UDL). The successful instructor must consider how students learn and communicate in order to deliver course materials that speak to many different types of learners. Many of the basic principles of traditional, face-to-face learning environments and course delivery still apply in virtual environments (Assis & Almeida, 2009; Siemens & Fulford, 2009; Dixon, 2010; Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Dodds, 2009; Ko & Rossen, 2010).

Facilitation of Online Communication Tools: With the advent of the Internet in the classroom, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has steadily become an increasingly prominent feature of the learning landscape of the 21st century. Instructors have many technological tools from which to choose, but before the tools are implemented, careful planning must take place. According to Wang, “Teachers need to plan thoughtfully before they start ICT integration into a curriculum. For instance, they have to choose the correct ICT tools for particular learning objectives or contexts, modify existing resources or develop new learning environments to engage specific groups of learners, or decide scaffolding strategies for student-centered learning” (2008). This thoughtful process not only applies to
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