**Communication with Students**

The instructor or faculty assigned to teach a distance-education course is expected to communicate effectively with his or her students:

- Respond to students’ e-mails or inquiries within 24 hours.
- Provide clear and adequate guidance for students.
- Maintain professional conduct and understanding of students’ diverse backgrounds.

**Additional DE Faculty Expectations**

The instructor or faculty assigned to teach a distance-education course is required to satisfy these additional guidelines:

- The distance education ratio of students to faculty must not exceed 25-1 ratio.
- Provide the same academic rigor to a distance-education course as delivered on ground or in traditional classroom.
- Request changes to master course syllabi must be vetted and approved by the learning community.
- New faculty members assigned to teach distance-education courses must review, initial, and sign a Faculty Expectations for Distance Education form. A copy of the form is located in Appendix A.
- Faculty assigned to teach a DE course must perform an audit of their own course by completing and signing a start-of-the-term checklist. The instructor, then, must forward the signed form to his or her program director and acquire the program director’s signature. Finally, the program director must send the completed form to the Distance Education Specialist for documentation purposes. A copy of the audit form is located in Appendix B.
Facilitating, Moderating, and Providing Feedback

Best Practices: Feedback to Students

As you evaluate and comment on students' reflective writing, remember that your goals are to encourage your students to write more, examine their own writing and learning, and feel comfortable when sharing their thoughts and opinions. One insensitive comment can stifle a student's desire to continue writing and sharing.

Make an effort to provide meaningful comments regularly. Many students appreciate an audience. They may apply themselves more when they know you are reading and commenting on their ideas. Offer praise, ask questions, and focus on content without solely dissecting the mechanics of the writing. Try to view these types of writing as unfinished products—reference points for how your students are progressing in their grasp of the course material.

As you provide feedback, keep in mind the following guidelines:

- Focus on the content and ideas. In the beginning, don't spend too much time on grammar and punctuation. If you intend to comment on or grade the mechanics, alert students ahead of time via e-mail.

- Write in complete sentences and include details. The more specific and concrete your comments are, the more helpful they will be to student writers.

- Always provide positive comments. When students know you appreciate their work, they will be more receptive to your comments about the areas needing further work. Make comments that let students know that you are a willing audience who looks forward to their writing.

- Avoid overwhelming a student with too many comments. Comment primarily on patterns that you see in a piece of work that represents strengths and weaknesses. Point out each once so as not to "over mark" a piece of work.

- Focus on the big idea. Help each student refine the "main point" and how to support it.

- Help students learn from their writing. Focus on what you want students to address in future work.

- Whenever possible, provide feedback to the class as a whole. Identify what most everyone did well and what they can continue to work on. This is an excellent opportunity to use the discussion board and post about a writing problem. Students can offer solutions and give feedback.
Build opportunities for revision into any kind of graded reflective writing assignment so that students can learn from your comments and refine their work. The Blackboard Learn journals, blogs, and wikis tools offer the ability for students to respond to your comments. This encourages a dialogue, which allows students to become active participants in the writing process. Students take on more responsibility as they revise, defend, and rethink. Ultimately, reflecting on their writing, reading comments, and communicating about those comments contribute to a better understanding of the course material and writing itself.

If you find that you are repeating yourself when providing feedback, copy and paste those comments from one student to another. Then, address the issue with the entire class.

The Art of Discussion Moderation

As an online instructor, your role is to facilitate the conversation and exchange of ideas on the discussion board. You need to be sure that students feel comfortable to share, while also monitoring responses and keeping everyone focused and on track. At the same time, you want to be careful not to dominate or impede the flow of the discussion.

The following list includes some suggestions for finding the right balance between guiding the conversation and leading it:

- Have students start with a nonacademic discussion as a warm-up.
- Ask probing questions that lead to other perspectives and ask for clarification.
- Have patience. Do not respond to every student’s post or rush to fill silences. You want students to contribute rather than depend on you.
- Engage students when long lulls occur.
- Redirect tangents to the appropriate topic.
- Reinforce posts that meet your expectations with public acknowledgement.
- Reply privately when dealing with individual issues or online behavior.
- Draw out hesitant students. Ask for clarification, resources, or input from them and acknowledge their efforts when they step outside of their comfort zones.
- Encourage new ideas.
- Define requirements for participation and provide a grading rubric where necessary.
- To promote active learning, assign roles to students, such as discussion leader, researcher, organizer, fact checker, encourager, summarizer, or technician.
• Summarize a thread or forum to bring closure to it. You or your students can provide the summaries.

Classroom Management

Because you are using technology that allows for anytime, anywhere learning, you may think that the ever-dreaded student excuses will disappear. Be warned—they may change due to the technology, but they will not disappear! Remember "the dog ate it," "the wind blew it away," and "I lost it" types of excuses? In online courses, the excuses have changed, but not limited to, the following examples:

• I forgot my password.
• My Internet connection failed.
• My computer crashed.
• The file disappeared.
• Other family members were using the computer.
• The school's computer lab was closed.

To deal with excuses proactively, publish your expectations. Suggest possible scenarios that may occur, such as the computer lab being closed, so they plan accordingly. Identify which excuses are not acceptable and assess special situations on a case-by-case basis. Give them an action plan in case of technical difficulties. Most importantly, emphasize accountability to the student and encourage them to always back up their work.

Chat and the Virtual Classroom

The collaboration tool includes the virtual classroom and chat. These are located in the Virtual Office.

• Chat is a text-based chat tool.
• Virtual classroom includes a whiteboard, chat panel, web browser, course map, and a question-and-answer area.

Both tools include areas where students can ask questions publicly and privately. Using chat and the virtual classroom, students can take virtual field trips, instructors can host virtual office hours, and groups can work together.

Users access chat and virtual classroom sessions on the Collaboration Sessions page. Click a title to enter the session. Each course contains a default virtual classroom session titled Lecture Hall and a default chat session titled Office Hours. You can rename or delete these default sessions.
Chat

The chat tool provides a large screen for the chat room. It was designed to be ideal for low bandwidth situations, such as when your students are connecting to the course using a dial-up connection.

After joining a chat session, students can send messages. The messages appear in the chat display panel for all participants who are currently in the room.

Managing Collaboration Sessions

Using real-time communication for academic purposes requires you to plan, structure, and moderate the sessions to create meaningful learning experiences for your students. In the following list, we take a look at several best practices for managing collaboration sessions.

**Orientation**

- Use the first session to explain your expectations, define online etiquette, and demonstrate how to use the tools.
- In your syllabus, outline chat etiquette and expectations. Tell students to use appropriate language, respect others, and keep comments relevant to the topic.
- Use subsequent sessions to help students focus on the instructional goals.

**Schedule**

- Schedule sessions in advance to increase participation. Be specific about meeting dates and times.
- Use other communication tools, such as the calendar, tasks, announcements, email, and course messages to notify students of this information.

**Participation**

- Chat works best for small groups of up to five participants or when responses from a larger group are limited.
- Use the session controls to define participant roles and control activity during collaboration sessions. Participants can use the raised hand icon and wait to be called upon, as well as request use of virtual classroom tools.
- Keep dialogue on topic and encourage participation through questions.
- Establish protocol for typing messages. For example, require a hard return after every line typed so the audience does not have to wait for the entire response to appear. Add an asterisk (*) at the end of the last sentence to signify completion.
Plan

- Prepare a focused topic in advance for each chat session.
- Establish a plan for engaging all students. Be aware of those who do not participate and encourage them.
- Assign roles so some students are presenters while others ask questions or provide answers.

Content

- Select your content or topic carefully.
- Use chat to summarize or review material already covered elsewhere in your course and to promote group work.
- Summarize major points at the end of a session or assign this task to participants.
- Record sessions for review and for students who missed a session.

**Instructor’s Role in a Distance Education Course**

One of your most important duties is to support students’ acquisition of knowledge so as to achieve the learning outcomes for the course.

**Pedagogical**

Best Practices

- Use discussions, journals, blogs, wikis, group work, and activities to guide students toward constructing their own knowledge and connecting it with what they already know.
- Identify unifying themes and weave together discussions, assignments, and course content.
- Provide resources and correct misconceptions if they occur.
- Motivate and encourage all students to participate.
- Assess learning outcomes.
- Make the material current and relevant for the student. Give them something they can apply to their lives.
Challenges

- Not dominating conversations and stepping back to allow students to lead learning.
- Achieving the right mix of activities.
- Adopting student-centered approaches.
- Maintaining momentum in discussions.
- Providing constructive feedback, keeping in mind when in print, anything can appear more harsh.

Social

Promoting personal interaction and group cohesiveness through mentoring and coaching helps students feel more relaxed in the online environment. When students are comfortable, they are more likely to contribute to online discussions and be more reflective in their journal and blog writing. Please keep in mind that student contribution correlates with enhanced learning.

Best Practices

- Develop your "presence" so students know there is a real, living, breathing instructor at the other end of the computer.
- Create and maintain an environment that promotes group cohesiveness.
- Provide reinforcement and constructive feedback to prevent feelings of isolation.
- Facilitate discussions that improve critical thinking, problem solving, adaptability, interaction, and communication through clarification and evaluation of others' ideas, all of which are valuable job skills.

Challenges

- Misunderstanding questions and comments due to the lack of nonverbal signals in the online environment.
- Helping students feel comfortable sharing their experiences, knowledge, and questions online.
- Ensuring a non-threatening environment where students respect all opinions, whether they agree with them or not.
- Dealing with students who "lurk"—that is read, but do not post substantive messages.
- Some students prefer only an individual effort and they have no desire to help others or ask for help. They object to the responsibility that comes with collaborative learning.
Managerial

Leading and directing online activities without completely dominating the learning experience takes a certain amount of finesse. However, if you provide clear structure for activities, discussions, and reflective writing assignments, you can minimize confusion and students can focus on the task at hand.

Best Practices

- Set expectations, requirements, and timelines.
- State objectives clearly and link to activities.
- Provide feedback and return assignments in a timely manner.

Challenges

- Tracking student progress.
- Accommodating a wide variety of skills and needs.
- Managing your time and helping your students do the same.
- Helping students accept the increased responsibility in the online classroom.
- Being overwhelmed with messages.
- Maintaining a positive attitude in the midst of challenges.

Technical

This may be the least favorite "hat" of some instructors, but it is necessary in the online classroom. It is important to be able to help students through the button-pushing so the technology ultimately becomes transparent.

Best Practices

- Become comfortable with any technology or tool prior to having your students use it.
- Provide technical resources such as the College help desk links.
- Provide a low-pressure, ungraded activity for students' first experience with a tool.

Challenges

- Troubleshooting at a distance when you cannot see a student's screen.
- Dealing with the many variables that can affect course access such as Windows and Mac issues and browser settings.
- Knowing the available resources to direct students to when the issue is beyond the scope of your duties.