



E-Learning Guides

6. Communicating in Online Discussions

This guide aims to provide an overview of constructive communication in the virtual environment and to raise awareness of:

- the potential of online communication
- the need for concise, considerate and constructive contributions
- the importance of netiquette and communication styles
- the development of an online identity

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Introduction

Many different tools are available to support online communication including **BlackBoard**, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of choice for GCU. Although the majority of these tools support both **synchronous** (real-time) chat and **asynchronous** (delayed response) conferencing, the latter is often found to be most useful as it allows time for reflection before posting a response. In order to make best use of this medium however, it is important for all of us involved (tutors and students) to understand how to adapt our normal communication style to suit the online environment.



For example, in any discussion which relies entirely on the written word there is a danger that the social aspects of communication may become less visible and the dialogue dull and uninteresting. Both tutors and students need to develop an **online presence** in order to make meaningful contacts with others and to establish some kind of identity within the group. Any kind of social interaction depends not only on what is said, but also on non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions. When these additional cues disappear the focus is entirely on the words used and more attention needs to be paid to the manner in which we express ourselves.

The main advantage of online conferencing is that everyone has time to **read and reflect** on new messages before responding with one of their own, which does encourage more thoughtful and considered contributions. Everyone can respond at a time that suits and there is no pressure to make an immediate and hasty reply as is often the case in face-to-face tutorials and seminars.

In all online conferencing the key role is that of the **e-moderator** who will ensure that discussions are meaningful and well-managed, and that any group activities are conducted within set timescales. S/he will set the tone, pose questions, summarise and direct the discussion. Students in turn will be expected to respond to this by logging on regularly and posting timely, relevant and constructive comments.

Communication styles

Everyone has their own preferred style of communication which comes across in both spoken and written interactions with others. Individual personalities and character traits are communicated in a number of ways, and there is scope for these differences to emerge also in the online environment. However if participants are unused to this new means of communication it can seem daunting at first, as everything which happens in the online conference is visible to the whole group, and messages remain there to be read for some time to come.

For example, it can be difficult to judge whether the tone should be **formal** or **informal**, or what the **acceptable length for messages** might be. This will inevitably vary from one online group to the next depending on its purpose and the preferences of its members. In a well-managed conference the tutor will set the tone and by reading through the tutor's messages and contributions from other students it should quickly become clear to all what is acceptable.



Reading from a screen can be tiring and demotivating, therefore messages should be kept reasonably **short and concise**. When sending a new message, the **title should be meaningful** so that others can decide immediately if it's one they'd be interested in reading. It's also easier to read messages if they are well laid out in **short paragraphs** rather than in unbroken lengths of text. Using **bold** or **coloured** text to **highlight keywords** can also help, especially if students are skimming a number of messages and you want to make sure that at least the key points are immediately noticeable. These features should be used sparingly however, as too many colours and fonts can also be unattractive and irritating to the reader and may have implications for accessibility.

There are often a wide range of **fonts** to choose from and it's tempting to experiment with some of the more unusual ones when formatting your contribution. It makes sense however to

choose one which is universally readable and to use it consistently. The font should also be of a reasonable size, usually 10 or 12 points, as text which is too small or too large can be difficult to read, depending on the screen resolution of the recipient. Try to avoid composing your message in upper case which **MAKES IT APPEAR YOU ARE SHOUTING** at those who read it. To change fonts and colours with BlackBoard, it's necessary to know some basic HTML tags. Advice on this, and other aspects of developing modules on BlackBoard, can be found on the eLISU web site at elisu.gcal.ac.uk/Online/HowTo.htm

If on occasion it becomes necessary to send a longer message, it may be simpler to create a Word (.doc) or rich text format (.rtf) document and send it as an **attachment** to the main message. This allows others to download and read it at their leisure, rather than be put off by a particularly long piece of text within a message.

Useful Tips	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give messages a meaningful title• Keep messages short and concise• Highlight key points in bold or coloured text• Use a font which is clear and easy to read, and of a reasonable size	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use paragraphs to divide text• Use file attachments rather than send long messages• Remember to respond to the correct thread in a discussion• Avoid using UPPER CASE in the body of your text

Expressing feelings

Despite the lack of visual clues, it is still possible to express feelings which can help to establish group identity and build relationships, thus leading to a more enjoyable and successful online interaction. Expressions such as -

" I agree/disagree"

" I'm confused....."

" I feel strongly about this"

" I'm finding this very interesting"

are useful in this context. Another way to express feelings in a light-hearted way is by the use of established symbols, known as **emoticons**, although again it's best if they're used sparingly. Some of the popular ones include:

Emoticons	
: -)	I'm smiling/happy
; -)	I'm winking
: - (I'm sad
: - D	big smile/I'm delighted
: - O	I'm surprised/shocked

And more of these can be found at:

www.cknow.com/ckinfo/emoticons.htm

www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/emoticons.html

It's easier for everyone to communicate if they know a bit more about other members of the group. If the online discussions are an enhancement to a campus-based course this may not be such an issue, but for distance courses, or those which are supporting students in the workplace, on placement or studying from home, it's helpful to have some brief details of each student available as a reminder of their interests. Some may already have a **personal home page** to which they can provide a link when they introduce themselves to the conference, or alternatively you can make use of the **BlackBoard** feature which allows you to provide some information about yourself and even post a photograph if you wish.

Motivation and Time Management

As the responsibility for online participation lies with each member of the group, there will inevitably be **varying levels of motivation** which will alter according to individual circumstances. Priorities may change over time, and occasionally there may be more pressing responsibilities which have to take precedence. Factors such as unexpected



shifts in workload, family commitments or even holidays may get in the way of regular participation, especially by part-time or distance students. If this happens, it's important for everyone to be made aware of the reason for any temporary disappearance.

Technical difficulties will inevitably cause frustration and loss of interest. To help avoid this, it's helpful for everyone (online tutors and students) to know who to approach for help within the Department/Division or School and if appropriate, central support services within the University. Each programme may have an established procedure for accessing technical help, including a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) which can be consulted for information. If no internet access is available, other means of contact such as telephone or face-to-face meetings may have to be used. Above all, it's vital to encourage all participants to **seek help quickly** before extended non-participation becomes a real problem. Similarly, if additional IT training is required, find out who will provide it and how you and your students can access it.

Effective **time management** is crucial and should be considered carefully from the outset. It can be helpful to schedule certain times each week to concentrate on responding to students online, and to make it clear to colleagues that you will be unavailable at these times. Seek **support** and **recognition** for your online activities in order to avoid the danger of regarding them as an additional burden in an already busy timetable.

For all online participants a **positive attitude** and an element of **self-discipline** are important factors, along with consideration for other members of the online community. Taking the time to gain confidence with the technology through practice and developing an effective online presence will have a major impact on motivation and identification with the group.

Netiquette



In view of all the issues raised so far, it is clear that there are many factors which can influence meaningful online communication. There are also certain expectations on the part of the students and tutors, the most important of which are undoubtedly **regular logging on** by all involved and a commitment to **constructive interaction**.

To establish the ground rules for communication there are certain guidelines, known as **netiquette**, which aim to encourage courteous and considerate behaviour online. These will vary according to the context, but it's possible to identify some universal factors which form the basis of effective interaction. The following are adapted from suggestions by a team of experienced online teachers (Harasim et al, 1997) who tell us that building and maintaining a sense of community can be helped by employing a few simple strategies:

- Use first names to establish rapport
- Respond promptly to messages
- Use reinforcement phrases (e.g. "Good idea" or "Thanks for the suggestions!")
- Personalise remarks
- Avoid inappropriate comments and never use offensive, sexist or racist language
- Promote co-operation by offering assistance and support to other students
- Share ideas, information and experiences

It can often be helpful for tutors and students to agree the ground rules at the start of a module or programme so that everyone is clear what the expectations are. There are many variations on these guidelines and more information can be found on several web sites including the following:

www.sol.co.uk/sol/email/netiquette.htm

www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html

It's important to remember that messages sent to an online discussion forum are read by the whole group, and that they will remain in the conference for some time to come. The impersonal nature of the technology may encourage some students to post a more strongly-worded response than normal and this can sometimes lead to **flaming**, as other group members will be tempted to reply in a similarly offensive tone. An experienced tutor will deal with this promptly and effectively, but students should be encouraged from the outset to avoid inappropriate comments which might lead to this situation. The checklist appended to this guide can be used as a basic starter for students who are new to online discussions. Above all, however, it is vital to ensure that common understandings are achieved, and that **no-one is excluded or disadvantaged** by the style and level of communication.

A Checklist for Participants

- Take time to become familiar with the communications software.
- Draw up a schedule for regular participation.
- Introduce yourself to the online conference as soon as possible and establish your virtual presence.
- Respond to the ideas and questions of other students, not just to the tutor.
- Where you are commenting on another contribution, continue the thread of the discussion by replying to that contribution rather than starting a new message in a new thread.
- Be polite, considerate and friendly online.
- Make sure you understand the requirements for any online activities and respect deadlines.
- Be open to new ideas and perspectives.
- Keep contributions short and to the point, and ensure they are posted to the right conference.
- Ensure that file attachments to messages are **virus free**.
- If you're going to be unavailable for any length of time, let others know in advance if possible.
- Most importantly, enjoy the experience and make the most of it!**



References

Harasim L., Hiltz S.R., Teles L., Turoff M. (1995) *Learning Networks: A field guide to teaching and learning online*, MIT Press, Massachusetts

Salmon, G. (2000) *E-Moderating: the key to teaching and learning online*. Kogan Page, London. Extracts available online at: <http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating/>

The full series of GCU E-Learning Guides is available to download from apu.gcal.ac.uk/pages/resources.htm

Author: Linda Creanor APU/GAPS

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