

Work With Students to Create Norms for Online Civility

Engaging students in a discussion about online communication norms and guidelines at the very beginning of a course helps to foster community and create a productive learning environment (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Stavredes, 2011).

Although instructors should include general expectations for online communication in the syllabus by providing a set of netiquette guidelines, you may also have students collaboratively create community norms and guidelines that are more personal and specific to your course's online learning community. Involving students in these discussions raises their awareness and helps them to more effectively adhere to guidelines regarding online civility. It is also a great way to start building community at the very beginning of the course. Below are two activities for engaging students in these important discussions.

Activity 1: Collaboratively Creating Guidelines

1. In a text or video announcement, explain the need for community norms and guidelines in an online environment and the importance of creating those norms together as a group. For example, you might write:

Every single one of us brings a wealth of knowledge and ideas from the perspective of our own lived experiences. Although some of our experiences and backgrounds might be similar in some ways, I can guarantee that there are just as many differences. And that is a good thing! It means we have a lot to learn from one another. In fact, the success of this course depends on every individual contributing their ideas and perspectives to our online discussions. To this end, we first need to set some ground rules or norms that will foster the kind of online space where engaging, respectful, and thought-provoking discussions can occur. Please proceed to the online discussion on Creating Community Norms and post your contribution.
2. Next, create a discussion forum that asks students to respond to the following prompts (and consider giving some participation points):
 - a. What kinds of behaviors make people feel like their ideas and contributions are valued and respected in an online discussion?
 - b. What kinds of behaviors make people feel like their ideas and contributions are not valued and respected in an online discussion?
3. After all students have posted, have students propose one community norm/guideline to a group workspace with the following instructions:
 - a. Read through your peers' comments about respectful and disrespectful online communication.
 - b. Based on what have been identified as respectful and disrespectful online discussion behaviors, propose one guideline or norm that would contribute to an environment in which we can have meaningful and respectful online discussions.
 - c. Post your guideline to our Community Guidelines Wiki. You can post a new guideline or suggest a revision/addition to a guideline you already see posted. You are free to make comments on any posting, but please do not delete anything that someone else has posted.

4. After all the students have given their input, clean up the document, ensuring the capture of all the ideas without unnecessary repetition. Using the announcement tool or a new discussion board, post the proposed guidelines with a brief note. For example:

Thank you for the thoughtful discussion on our learning community norms and guidelines for communicating with one another! This list represents what you have identified as important guidelines for our online discussions; these guidelines are our commitment to one another. So, please keep them in mind in all your discussion postings. I may occasionally provide a reminder, and you can also remind one another. In addition, please remember the netiquette guidelines in our syllabus. Abiding by these norms and guidelines will help you learn more through the high-quality discussions we will have. This is why the participation portion of your grade is high and worth 20% of the overall grade for the course.

Activity 2: Netiquette Guidelines Discussion

Another way to discuss online communication norms and expectations in an online environment is to provide a basic list of netiquette guidelines and ask students to reflect and comment on them.

For example:

1. As part of the orientation module, ask students to read the guidelines and post a response to the following questions:
 - a. How do these online netiquette guidelines contribute to a positive online learning environment?
 - b. Are there any netiquette guidelines that might present challenges to some students?
 - c. Are there any netiquette guidelines that we should consider adding or changing?

After all of your students have posted their comments, integrate any appropriate changes into the guidelines and post a finalized copy explaining any changes you have made. Let students know that by participating in this course, they are opting in to abide by these guidelines and they need to hold themselves and others accountable. For example:

Thank you for the thoughtful comments on the netiquette guidelines. Now that we have everyone's input, the netiquette guidelines I have posted, taking your comments into consideration, are our commitment to one another. So, please keep them in mind in all your discussion postings. I may occasionally provide a reminder, and you can also remind one another. Abiding by these norms and guidelines will help you learn more through the high-quality discussions we will have. This is why the participation portion of your grade is high and worth 20% of the overall grade for the course.

Sources

- Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
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- Stavredes, T. (2011). *Effective online teaching: Foundations and strategies for student success*. Jossey-Bass.