

Assessment and Diversity

Distance Education

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Diversifying and Improving Student-Instructor Communication

by Richard W. Slatta, PhD and Jennifer Blossfeld

This article was contributed by a professor and student team regarding their viewpoints on student/professor communication brought about by a Distance Education experience.

Effective student-instructor communication is critical for success in any class. It is important for students to seek knowledge through inquiry rather than the simple memorization of facts, and quality inquiry requires open communication. It is also important that instructors be available not only to answer questions but also to encourage more questioning. Far too often students and instructors communicate at a minimal level, and that can create major problems. During a Distance

Education course, we had a major communication failure in which we both made gaffes. We offer these suggestions in hopes of helping both students and instructors to diversify their channels of communication and, thus, communicate more effectively.

Broaden the range of communications and keep them ongoing. Utilize all available media: e-mail, instant message (IM), telephone, and face-to-face. If a problem arises in one medium, immediately broaden the conversation to other media. Students and instructors both need to utilize multiple venues for successful communication. If possible, meet during office hours; a private face-to-

face meeting can resolve many miscommunications quickly. A telephone call can also help, and both students and instructors need to be willing to initiate such exchanges. Instructors need to be readily available, and students need to question or comment with frequency.

Improved communication enhances a sense of instructor "immediacy," which helps counteract the students' sense of isolation and distance in an online environment. Students seem especially concerned about instructor immediacy and about building relationships in online classes. "The extensive research on teacher immediacy (and related variables) has provided evidence

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Assessment Guidelines—NCSU Style

The Assessment Work Group, which includes assessment professionals from across campus and selected staff and faculty, has been active for two

years. (The list of those in the Assessment Work Group can be found at: <http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/awg.htm>). This

group focuses on improving communication, cooperation, and processes related to assessment at NC State University. In their discussion, the group has



Pointers on Communication

1. *Broaden the range of communications and keep them ongoing.*
2. *Improved communication enhances a sense of instructor "immediacy," which helps counteract the students' sense of isolation and distance in an online environment.*
3. *Don't jump to conclusions or make unwarranted assumptions.*
4. *Practice full disclosure.*
5. *Be civil and respectful when engaging in dialog and discussion.*
6. *Be proactive, not reactive.*
7. *In the classroom or in a conversation, silence is OK.*
8. *Don't ignore nonverbal communication.*
9. *Keep all communication at a professional level.*

Communication...Communication...Communication

that closeness between teachers and students enhances learning and motivation" (Dobransky and Frymier 2004). Such a sense of immediacy pushes interactions toward a more student-centered classroom, where "students reported learning more than they did in a teacher-centered classroom" (Lawrence 2001, quoted in Dobransky and Frymier 2004). Sending occasional video messages to students can help increase instructor immediacy.

Don't jump to conclusions or make unwarranted assumptions. Jacqui Hawkins-Morton, Assistant Director of the NCSU First Year College, constantly urges students to "always ask questions." If an instructor or advisor receives a badly written and/or unintelligible email; request another message or use another medium. If a student does not understand or perceives hostility in an instructor email; call or visit the instructor for clarification. Visiting an instructor to work things out, while preferable, can be difficult with online classes, because some students live too far away or have medical issues. In all cases, students and instructors should assume that all messages have been sent with the best of inten-

tions, and both should work hard at communicating in a constructive way. In online courses, a professor may have trouble developing any sort of relationship with students. This can lead to incorrect assumptions about students and, thus, miscommunication. Because professors probably do not know about students' individual circumstances, they may be less likely to show understanding and support toward students' problems.

Practice full disclosure. Both the instructor and the student must understand the context in which the other is working. An instructor teaching a large number of students may well have to resort to terse, focused communication, lacking time for fuller elaboration of issues and questions. When questions arise, they often cannot be answered immediately and may not be answered fully. Student medical, familial, or personal issues can hurt academic performance. Students need not provide intimate details of their personal lives, but they should notify instructors of any extenuating circumstances. Instructors should be alert to any sudden drops in student performance that may indicate out-of-class problems.

Be civil and respectful when engaging in dialog and discussion. Articulating arguments clearly is a responsibility of both students and instructors, but "verbal aggressiveness leads to destructive outcomes" (Mottet, et al 2004). Thus all should make their points fully and vigorously, but avoid "flaming," inappropriate language, or ad hominem attacks. Discussion forums, emails, and instant messages (IMs) are all important methods of online communication and can leave lasting impressions.

Be proactive, not reactive. Involve knowledgeable others sooner rather than later. If major problems arise, involve other appropriate, interested, professional parties, including the student's advisor, DELTA support staff, the counseling center, constituent services, and perhaps disability services or parents.

In the classroom or in a conversation, silence is OK. Parker J. Palmer (1998: 46) reminds instructors to avoid "rushing to fill our students' silences with fearful speech of our own and not trying to coerce them into saying the things that we want to hear." Students, too, need not chatter to fill "dead air

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time” with “ums,” “likes,” and other vocalized pauses. Online communication has the virtue of time for reflection, so don’t feel that you must answer an email that second. Both students and instructors should take advantage of asynchronous communication—reread the message, reflect, and compose a thoughtful response.

Don't ignore nonverbal communication. In face-to-face interaction, both student and faculty gestures and postures can enhance or diminish classroom communication. “Students should not underestimate the power they have in reaching their instructional and interpersonal goals by using nonverbally responsive communication behaviors such as forward body leans, head nods, and direct eye contact” (Mottet, et al 2004). Online, humor, irony, or satire is often difficult to decode. When in doubt, toss in an emoticon , so that the reader knows the statement is in jest.

Keep all communication at a professional level. In the eyes of the reader, especially in a Distance Education environment, you are what you write. “Hey” is never an appropriate salutation. Students should make certain

to include their names and course and section numbers when emailing instructors. Don’t send off quick grammatically flawed IM text messages or emails. Set your email client to check spelling. Proofread the message to make sure it all makes sense. Be thoughtful, regardless of the medium.

In conclusion, Loren Pope (2000: 12), author of *Forty Colleges that Change Lives*, reminds us that “involvement with good teachers is what helps young minds grow.” Sandra Stallings, Coordinator of Advising for the NCSU Department of Communication, seconds that view: “There's nothing like the face-to-face conversations outside of class to enhance mutual respect and, to me, respect is a cornerstone of improved communication.” If face-to-face meetings are not possible, then alternative technologies should also foster involvement and respect— qualities that will enhance any campus environment for both students and instructors.

Works cited:

Dobransky Nicole D. and Ann Bainbridge Frymier. (2004) "Developing teacher-student relationships through out of class communication." *Communication Quarterly*, 52:3 (Summer): 211-24.

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Palmer, Parker J. (1998) *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Pope, Loren. (2000) *Forty colleges that change lives: 40 schools you should know about even if you're not a straight-A student*. Rev. ed. New York: Penguin. ■

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Richard W. Slatta is a professor of history at NCSU, where he has taught since 1980.

Jennifer Blossfeld is a junior psychology major.

If you would like to contribute an article about your experiences with Distance Education at NC State, please feel free to submit it to monica_price@ncsu.edu.

The article can be more immediately posted on the website and, then, in the next edition of the newsletter.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE FOR ASSESSMENT REPORTS:

- *Distance Education and Diversity: Barriers to College Entry, Retention, and Community Engagement*
- *Distance Education Administrative Services Student Surveys*

<http://distance.ncsu.edu/adde>

Distance Education Learning Technology Applications (DELTA)

Assessment and Diversity—Distance Education (ADDE)
Campus Box 7113
Raleigh, NC 27695-7113

Phone: (919) 513-7914
Fax: (919) 513-4237
E-mail: monica_price@ncsu.edu

Visit our website:

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

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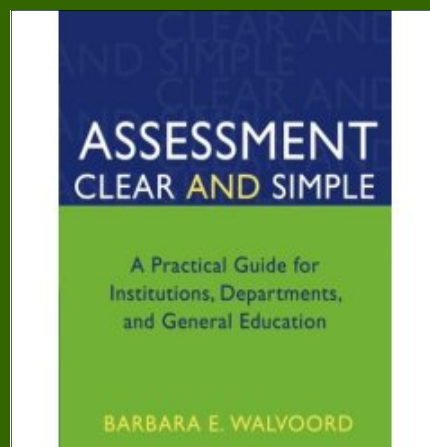
http://delta.ncsu.edu/learn/certificate_programs/summer_institute/

If you have announcements related to assessment and diversity that you would like to post, please contact monica_price@ncsu.edu.

A BOOK TO CONSIDER...

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Assessment Guidelines continued...



Assessment helps to gauge our progress over time.

developed two documents: *Guiding Principles* and *Statements of Best Practice*. The *Guiding Principles* were developed by the Assessment Work Group to guide assessment efforts across NC State University. These *Principles* are core values and philosophies that describe how NC State University currently conducts and strives to conduct assessment. Developing and reviewing these principles

assists the coordination of assessment, provides a perspective of what is expected, and increases the sense of shared responsibility for student learning. The *Statements Of Best Practices* for assessment at NC State University were developed as a subset to the *Guiding Principles for Assessment*. The best practices statements are intended to provide direction, focus, and vision for assessment at NC State Univer-

sity. These statements can be found at the following website (soon): <http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/index.html>

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This article was submitted by Joni Spurlin, PhD.

Dr. Spurlin is the University Director of Assessment.