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Transcript

What Are the Communication 'Musts' in an Online Class?

Presented by:
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Jill Schiefelbein: Hi. And welcome to this Magna 20 Minute Mentor. The topic of this mentor session is <u>What Are the Communication "Musts" in an Online Course?</u> My name is Jill Schiefelbein, and I'll be your presenter for this session.

I'm the Owner and Guru at Impromptu Guru, which is a company that focuses on communication. I help people speak well any time and every time, and communicate effectively in both online and face-to-face environments.

I'm also an adjunct faculty member at Arizona State University, where I've been teaching for the past eight years. And, no surprise, I teach in the communication department. So, hopefully, I'll be able to transmit a lot of my communication knowledge to you in this truncated session today.

And should you want to communicate or interact with me, I would love to have you. Please e-mail me. Use Twitter. Use Facebook. Or if you find something in this mentor presentation that is great for you, tweet it, call me out on Facebook, any of those types of interactivity are great ways to communicate and great ways to engage. So let's talk more about that, shall we?

Today, our agenda is a step-by-step guide to effective communication in online classes. And when we're looking at communication in online classes, I want to start us out with the first axiom of communication that one cannot not communicate. Poorly constructed, if you're an English teacher, and you're a harp on grammar, I know.

But back in the day, not really back in the day, but back in the day for the communication field, Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, three communication scholars, came up with five axioms, five axioms of communication. This is the first axiom. It's the most commonly cited, and I want to talk about it first, because it's very pertinent to what we do or don't do in our online classes.

So let me have this sink in. One cannot not communicate. What that means for us, as instructors, and especially instructors in the online classroom, is that no matter what we are doing or not doing, we are communicating a message to our students.

If you are not posting announcements regularly, not e-mailing your students regularly, not adding the personal touch of introducing yourself to your students, that is communicating, and it's sending a message that I'm guessing you probably don't want to send.

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So I want you to keep that in mind. That what you are not doing does communicate a message, and it does communicate it very clearly. Luckily though, in this presentation, we're going to talk about five steps to establish communication credibility.

So we don't have to worry about what we're not communicating being the real message here, I'm going to give you five steps and five pointers to really get your communication credibility established in your class, and, simultaneously, while you're going that, your students are going to feel more connected with you as the instructor, more connected to the content in the course, and more free to engage and interact and really take their material and content to heart.

So let's go ahead and get started with these five steps. The first is using instructor introduction and course expectation videos. So I've kind of put two in one here. I know I'm cheating a little bit. But instructor introduction and course expectation videos, so think to yourself, if you don't have these already, boom, here's a way to automatically improve your communication.

In your instructor introduction video, you want to accomplish three things, and those three things are on the screen. You want to introduce yourself. You want to have creative credentials, and you want to give personality. Let me overview these briefly for you.

In introducing yourself, you need to give the basic information that establishes you, obviously, as the instructor and the expert, maybe what your education was in, how many times you've taught the course, other universities or institutions you've taught at, the basic information.

But then I like to move into what I call creative credentials. If you have an article or a book or a chapter that you wrote that was really fun, tell your students about it. If you had a blog post that got a lot of attention, or maybe you blog, tell your students about it.

If you're on Twitter, and you want your students to interact with you that way, tell them about it. Give creative credentials. Say a few things fun about yourself. An example that I give in my instructor introduction is that I love cycling, I'm an avid cyclist. I love to travel, and, randomly, I actually got involved in studying communication in counterterrorism when I was in grad school and actually got to . . . through al-Qaeda documents and use them in a communication study.

Is that directly relevant to the class I'm teaching? Maybe, maybe not. But it's something interesting, and it's a creative credential that does give me credibility but also expands the students' view of me. So I'm not a

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computer. I'm not a mediation. I'm an actual person who's going to be interacting with them in the class.

And giving personality is the same thing. Telling some things that you do, showing some pictures. Me, I have a cat, who I just adore, yes, I'm one of those cat people, and sometimes in instructor videos, depending on the semester and my mood, if she happens to be in my office that day, because I work out of home, I'll lift her up and show her in the video. Give personality and let your students get to know you. This will provide many benefits, not just at the beginning of the class, but that will actually run throughout.

Next in step number one is a course expectation video, and most people know enough to do an introduction of themselves. And maybe they do it via text, but you can up that ante if you do it via video. But the course expectation video is incredibly important too, especially, in my opinion, if you teach shortened sessions. Like maybe you have nontraditional sessions, like a summer session that may be five weeks. These are even more important in those.

What a course expectation video does is it first sets you and your students up for success. It establishes your communication policy second, talks about time usage third, your late policies or any other policies that you have for that matter fourth, and then grading notes fifth.

Let me give you an example of this course expectation video, and how it may play out. In setting your students up for success, you want to tell them what your expectations are of them as students. So tell them what you expect of them. Tell them also what they can expect from you.

You want to give your communication policies. How do you want them to communicate with you, and when will you communicate with them? Pretty standard for me is if you send me an e-mail, you should expect a response within 24 hours. And if you do not get a response, please resend the e-mail as maybe it got lost in cyberspace. That's my standard policy. But I communicate this via the course expectations video.

I also talk about the importance of professional communication and respect, so, actually, heaven forbid, capitalizing those I's and using proper English grammar instead of acronyms in e-mails, I do discuss this in this video. And by doing it in the video instead of just explaining it in the syllabus, I have gotten exponentially higher results of students communicating in a professional way.

Third, time usage. How should they manage their time in the course? In a summer course, for example, a single day in a summer course is like three

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class periods in a traditional semester, and communicating this to students is important. So whatever that time usage may be for your particular class, get that out there.

Communicate any late policies or other policies pertinent to the course. Getting this out again ahead of time reiterates those policies in a different format. So people who aren't just good at taking things in by reading will have this video to listen to and watch, and they will also be able to tell by the tone of your voice and the expression on your face if you do it via video as well, that these are important.

And, finally, grading notes. This ties back into those expectations. But how will they be graded, and at what timeline will they be graded? Will they have grading and feedback to them within 48 hours, 72 hours, a week? Be sure to communicate those things to them.

And, again, doing this via video all up front not only establishes you as a more credible instructor, but it makes students feel like they can relate with you more, and that is incredibly important as you'll see in just a minute.

The next thing that I love to have established in a course is a hallway conversations area. Other people refer to this as general discussion too, but I love the term hallway conversations. And we use this at ASU online.

Hallway conversations, what they do is they replicate the out of class environment. So, for example, before you go into the classroom or immediately after a face-to-face class, you typically have a hallway. And people communicate in the hallways. Students talk about what they just discussed in class. Students talk about the assignment before they come in class. They discuss the reading. They even discuss social issues based on the campus, for example.

We want our online students to have a hallway environment. And by creating this hallway conversations area, you're replicating this out of class environment for them. It's a great place, as you see on the screen, to provide general questions about the course. I always say in my course expectations video to use the hallway conversations for questions that will apply to more than just you, that way other students and I can answer it.

And sometimes it's great, because students will answer students, as you can see on the screen here. Students are online at all different times, and sometimes someone will have a question that another student can answer. Boom. Take some responsibility away from you as the instructor. Take some time away from you from getting those incessant e-mails, and it also

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gives you the ability to point back to that post should someone ask you a question.

And that's what I mean by referring to other's posts for answers. If students e-mail you a question that's already been answered, say check out the hallway conversations area, much more efficient in an e-mail than actually responding to all of those questions. So the hallway conversation area is a great way, again, to replicate that out of class environment, and I encourage students to use it. And I've had students use it in very successful ways.

Next, number three, we got to voice announcements, also known as housekeeping. Depending on your learning management system or content management system, your course site, you may not have the ability to do voice announcements already embedded. However, you can use tools such as a sound recorder or Audacity to help you with that.

And if you refer to the handout that I provided, you have the five communication musts that are broken down, but you also have, on the second and third pages, different links to different technologies that will help you accomplish all of these different communication musts that I'm discussing.

So make sure refer to that, to refer to that worksheet, excuse my slur, when you're thinking about using these communication musts in your class. I'll be focusing on how to utilize them most effectively here. I'm not telling you about the technologies. That's why I put those in the handouts.

So voice announcements and housekeeping. What you're going to do with these is you're going to talk about the week or unit. Whatever modulation you have for your class, you want to do this at the beginning of each module unit week, however it's laid out, for your particular course. And what you want to do is you want to talk about the week and about the content. You also want to cover any due dates that are relevant in that time period, and you also want to give a personal message.

So these four things go into the voice announcement, and there's a couple ways to do it, and I'll give you some tips here. What this does is it equates to the housekeeping that you do in your face-to-face class.

So in your face-to-face class, when you come in, sometimes you have the small talk, how was a weekend, or how was this activity, how was that? Here's what we're going to be doing this week. Here's what we're going to be covering. Here are some due dates coming up. All of those housekeeping type activities that we do in class, we do those online too where we need to be.

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This is a communication must. And if you do this with regularity, your students will be more comfortable communicating with you as an instructor, and, again, it can also cut down on the amount of e-mail that you've received asking questions that you've probably already answered somewhere.

Doing it via voice also gives that personal touch, that more rich media and that interactivity with your students, so they feel like, again, it's you and not a computer that's teaching the course.

You can overview the week, talk about the content you're going to be discussing, add something personal in there. If you have a good story about the content, how you've related to the content, or maybe how students can relate to the content, even better if something's happening in current media environments that you can connect to the content, put that in there.

Talk about the due dates that they have and then give a personal message. And by a personal message, I mean, connect it to maybe the previous week in the class. So let's say in the previous week, you notice a trend in the discussion assignments or papers that were presented. Use this voice announcement to communicate about those, and, again, connect all of the course elements together.

Here's another tip that you can use to save time with voice announcements, and I'll admit, I do this in my classes. I actually divide the voice announcements up to two. And so every day, in my summer class, for example, every day they have an announcement, but in a regular semester, every week they'll have an announcement. And I record this, and I can reuse it semester after semester.

I don't use specific dates, but I'll say this week we are going to cover, and this week our content is, and this week you have the following assignments due. I can reuse that if I don't give specific dates every single semester where my content is the same, and that's good, because it will save you time as an instructor, so you can repurpose that.

Then what I do is for each class, the personal message, and I reiterate the exact due dates I record. So I have the voice announcements that are done every week, that are already recorded, and the personal ones, I actually add in new each semester. This is a great way, again, to save yourself some time but then really, truly be able to connect with your students.

Think about it this way. If your voice announcements are plain, dry cut, and have the same thing every week, your students aren't going to feel that

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connection to you. In essence, you are not communicating your connection to them.

By adding information of a personal message, connecting what you're doing this week with a previous week, saying this is what I noticed in the discussion board, and here's how you can improve your grades. By adding things that are personal, you are communicating a clear message to them that you are engaged with the course, and that is incredibly important.

The last thing you want to do, and I apologize for not moving this bullet forward, is talking about observations. I actually just talked about how you would do that with observations about material. I forgot that bullet was there.

Next let's talk about quarterly check-ins. So the course is set up well. You have the course introduction and course expectations video, and, already, you're noticing that students aren't asking as many questions via e-mail. Fantastic. You're saving yourself time.

Next you see that you have this hallway conversation area. The questions student have, they're actually interacting with each other to get answers, or if you post answers, you're only doing it in one place, again, saving you time.

You move on into those voice announcements, where you really give some immediate interaction and add that sense of immediacy and personality in your class. Fantastic. Three communication musts already accomplished.

The fourth one is quarterly check-ins. And if you look at your handout again, I'll refer to it, the five musts, I define what I mean in more detail by each of these, and, specifically, quarterly check-ins. As it would suggest, you want to do these quarterly check-ins at quarter intervals throughout your course. So whether you have a 16-week course, and you do one every 4 weeks, or you do one during the 1st week of your course, if it's the summer, divide it up, your course, into 4 separate parts.

And in these quarterly check-ins, you're going to do the following. You're going to give a current grade status. What I really like about these, and it has saved me so much time just by doing it, is at every quarter point, I will say to my students, here are the amount of points we've already earned in the course, and here is a grade delineation. So this many points, this many points is an A, B, C, D, F and so on.

And just sending that out in an e-mail every quarter really gets students alert to how they're doing in the class. It can prevent future problems later

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if students need to get caught up, and it's a good way, again, to let students know that you are active in the course. You're not just a computer. Again, I can't emphasize that human touch and communication enough, and that you're giving them information relevant to them at that point in time.

You also want to give encouragement. In these quarterly check-ins, I do these via e-mail, actually, I give encouragement to the students. So, for example, sometimes I'll send out a special e-mail to everyone who's getting an A and B and saying, you're either getting an A or a B in this course. Keep up the good work. For those who are getting a B, if you want to bump that grade up, you have plenty of time to do it. For those of you getting an A, keep doing what you're doing.

Likewise, for students who may be getting a C, D, or E or F grade depending on how you do it, I will put encouragement in there that, hey, you have plenty of time left in the course to bring this grade up, or I will provide them resources, like, hey, if you want to bring your grade up, you can do so. Go the writing center. Use tutoring services on campus or anything that you have to help encourage them to take advocacy and responsibility over what they're doing.

Again, give the grading scale. I talked about that, when you're giving the current grade, and then, again, the points remaining. So I'll reemphasize this again. When you're giving the current grade in the class, you always want to provide a grading scale and points remaining, and give some encouragement too. This is a great thing to do with your quarterly check-ins.

And what I love about quarterly check-ins, is because you're giving the student something, you're giving them pieces of information that are useful to them, and, in exchange, it's a key feedback opportunity. You can ask students questions about how they're doing in the class, how they're feeling about the class, what did they think of certain assignments, or what troubles maybe they're having.

You can get this feedback proactively, so moving forward, you know what situations to address in a more effective way. Great feedback opportunity. And, because you're sending these out via e-mail, you get that feedback to your inbox, and, oftentimes, you can implement it immediately in your classroom.

And, finally, our fifth communication must is genuine connection. I've emphasized this and alluded to it in all different parts of this presentation, but establishing that genuine human connection. Remember, what you're not communicating does make a difference, and any chance you have to make that connection with your students actually does enhance their

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experience in the class and will let them feel more free to engage with you and more deeply understand the material.

Most of us, as instructors, absolutely love when we have students who genuinely want to learn more about the material. Communicate with us about it. We get to share our knowledge. We get to have good conversations. And sometimes we even learn great examples and stories from our students. By establishing this genuine connection and making that a communication must in your online class, you're more apt to get those stories, more apt to make those connections, and have them long and lasting.

Thank you so much for listening to this presentation on the five communication musts, and we would like feedback from you. Tell us what you think by filling out our SurveyMonkey evaluation form that's located at the link on your screen. And, of course, should you like to continue the conversation with me, you know how to get a hold of me, and I welcome your communication. Thanks again.