

Creating a Supportive Online Classroom Environment

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Abstract

Effective classroom management is necessary to create a supportive learning environment where students can learn in a meaningful way, especially in an online environment. Research, education and training, consulting and online teaching experience have all helped to develop techniques for an effective and supportive online classroom: communicate clearly and often; set expectations; offer constructive and timely feedback; build rapport; be present; respect, encourage, and motivate students; reach out to them; build community; and keep course content relevant.

Introduction

“Effective classroom management is necessary to create a supportive learning environment and a supportive learning environment is essential if students’ learning experiences are to be meaningful.” (Curtis, 2008, p. 77). The keys to effective classroom management for a supportive online learning environment are clear communication and responsiveness from the instructor. While students appreciate the convenience and flexibility of online learning, they also want to enjoy the benefits of an in-class experience. Much of the available literature emphasizes students interacting with the course content. However, in addition to the content of the course, students seem to want interaction with their fellow students and instructors. This social interaction is important, and instructors can emphasize and facilitate interaction. Without it, online learning can become merely a self-paced, individualized approach to learning. Effective coaching and management by an online instructor facilitates collaborative problem solving amongst students. While there is little conclusive proof that interaction improves learning outcomes, it enriches the learning experience by contributing to motivation and course completion rates (Chalmers, 1999).

Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker (2003) described three roles for instructors in online courses: guide-on-the-side, instructor/project leader, and group process facilitator. The “guide-on-the-side,” or coach approach, gives the instructor an opportunity to coach and assist students to engage in dialogue that allows them to be the prime influencers on the culture of the online classroom. Online instructors also act as project managers or team leaders within the course by being in control of the feedback and content and by facilitating peer support. Collison et al. also encourage online instructors to facilitate process by “Leading introductory, community building activities, providing virtual ‘hand-holding’ to the ‘digitally-challenged’” (Collison, et al, 2003, p. 49) as well as acknowledging the diversity of the participants. While students in online classes should be computer literate, often an instructor will find first-time online students getting used to the virtual classroom concept and not as computer literate as they could be, so

patience and encouragement are required to help these students make the transition to online learning. This role also includes facilitating the discussions and communicating one-on-one with students via e-mail and telephone (Collison, et al, 2003).

Best Practices for Supporting Online Classrooms

Communicate Clearly and Often

Experience shows that instructors should communicate clearly and often throughout the duration of an online course. The first communication should be a timely welcome letter from the instructor to each student welcoming the student to the course. Even though one e-mail may be distributed to all, an individual e-mail to each student rather than a group e-mail helps to build rapport. This e-mail should be sent out a few days before the course start date, or at the very latest, early on the first day of the course. It fulfills several purposes. First, it introduces the instructor to the students and welcomes them to the class. It also sets the tone for the course by including information that the instructor deems most important, such as pointing out important assignments, describing how to succeed in the course, directing students to the syllabus, and advising them about how to get started in the course. By sending the welcome letter as an e-mail, students receive the communication in their e-mail inboxes and are more likely to read it sooner than if it is posted in the course as an announcement. It also ensures that students who don’t know how to access the course will get the information, and it should contain instructions about how to access the course and get started in order to help those who may not be clear about how to do that. Following is an example of the Getting Started section of a welcome e-mail:

Now, let’s get started:

1. *Access the course at [insert course URL].*
2. *Use your login information and select the [insert course name and number here].*

3. *Please go to the discussion board by clicking on the Discussion Board tab on the left of your screen. Select the forum for the student introductory assignment, and write and post a brief description of your background and interests, your international business experience, something of interest about you, and your expectations from this course.*
4. *When you see your classmates' introductions, please respond to them.*
5. *Begin working on the Session 1 discussion forum. If you have any questions, post them in the Q&A discussion forum.*

Consistent communication reduces confusion. Instructors should post regularly to the course by making regular announcements and discussion posts. Approximately two announcements a week will build student confidence that the instructor is fully engaged in the course. The first announcement can welcome students to the session for that week and indicate the learning objectives and topic for discussion that will be covered, as well as reminding students about the assignments that will be due. If the instructor's experience has been that students are unclear about certain aspects of the assignment, an e-mail giving tips about how to approach the assignment is appropriate. At the end of the week, the instructor also posts an announcement letting students know that discussion grades and/or assignment grades have been posted and summarizes the material covered in those previous discussions and assignments.

An instructor learns from experience in teaching a specific course how to improve communication and instructions by observing how students respond to instructions and what questions they ask. This observation will help to improve communication over time so that an instructor can provide clear instructions to students for all aspects of the course. This includes learning objectives, assignment instructions, discussion topics, grading rubrics, assignment and discussion feedback, and announcements. In short, all communication must be clear and specific.

Set Clear Expectations

Setting clear expectations at the outset of each online course helps students to be better prepared for the course. It is important to tell students what is expected from them. This can be accomplished through several tools in the course. First, the course learning objectives should be clearly described and listed, so that students know what they will be expected to achieve. Assignments should be designed to help students meet the course learning objectives. As the course progresses, an effective instructor manages the discussion board in the course to ensure that the learning objectives are covered in the discussion.

A syllabus for the course is a contract between student and instructor, clearly outlining the course learning objectives, assignments, course schedule, and grading expectations. Students should be instructed to review the syllabus early in the course and to ask questions to ensure that they understand the course requirements. Communication should be given that students are expected to print out the syllabus and course schedule and keep them handy so that they can refer to them as needed. Having the course schedule in a format that is easy to assimilate at a glance helps students to see the course requirements easily and also to keep on track of assignment due dates.

At some schools curriculum guides and syllabi are prepared by the department and can be edited by instructors, so each instructor is able to ensure that the syllabus and its included course schedule are posted in the course and easy to access. Other schools may provide more or less freedom to faculty in this area.

For consistency in grading, experience has shown that having grading rubrics for all assignments helps to keep grading consistent. When these are included in the course, it is advisable to remind students about them when they are working on the assignments so that they keep them in mind as they prepare their assignments. This can be done by posting an announcement to refer students to the syllabus and grading rubrics or by posting the grading rubrics in the announcement.

Students need to know and understand the expectations for participating in the discussion forums. Typically, discussion par-

ticipation should be evaluated with both qualitative and quantitative feedback. For students to be able to make their best contributions to the discussion, instructors should inform them what they need to do to earn full points for participating. The instructor should inform them how frequently they should participate and should specify the approximate length and number of posts and type of content. Additionally, discussion participation should count toward the final grade to ensure that students actively participate to enhance their learning (Bender, 2003).

Providing good communication and setting expectations also involves telling students what they can expect from the instructor. This can be accomplished by including the information in the welcome e-mail or by posting a separate announcement that lets students know when the instructor is online, when grades will be returned, how the instructor will participate in the course, and how long it will take to respond to students' queries.

Offer Constructive and Timely Feedback

Effective online instructors offer constructive and timely feedback by responding to student posts on the discussion board and student e-mails daily. Students should be advised that the instructor will respond to e-mails within twenty-four hours. If they know that they may not get a response for twenty-four hours, they are more likely to be proactive in looking ahead to make sure that their questions are answered before they need the information to meet deadlines. Timely feedback has more impact while the content and participation are fresh in students' minds, so student participation in discussion boards should be graded within forty-eight hours of the end of the week. Longer assignments should be graded within the week that they are submitted. Each week, an announcement to students indicating when they can expect to receive their grades for the previous week's assignments keeps them informed and manages their expectations.

The Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (October, 2008) reminds us that everyone likes to succeed, so it is important that feedback be positive and clear. One way to begin

feedback is to congratulate students for what they have done well. Tell the student what he or she did right before launching into what was not right. In fact, telling students how to improve is more positive than sharing what was wrong with the assignment. Students who did not do well on an assignment can be invited to contact the instructor during his/her office hours to discuss the feedback in person and receive extra help (Center for Enhancement of Learning & Teaching, 2008). A hypothetical example of positive feedback follows:

"[Mary], you did a great job of describing what is meant by globalization. To strengthen your answer, you could have also included a description of the major forces that have driven globalization and a discussion of the changing nature of our economy."

Students who read the grading rubrics will expect to be graded by them, so instructors should relate feedback to the rubrics. This can be accomplished by directly referencing the rubrics in student feedback by either including a table or grid with the rubrics and the assigned grade for each rubric or by referring to the rubrics in the comments.

After an assignment or week's discussion participation is complete, summaries and samples can be posted for student review and exam preparation. For example, at the end of each week, module, or unit, it is helpful if the instructor posts a summary of the content and the important points that relate to the learning objectives for that portion of the course. For assignments such as case studies or written assignments, a sample of a model or very good assignment can be posted for students to review. Experience has shown that it is helpful to post some accompanying comments to be clear about expectations. This avoids the confusion that can result in the case where more than one approach to the right answer is possible, such as with a case study. Posting a sample along with comments indicating that there were multiple correct approaches to an assignment will help expand students' perspectives.

Build Rapport

All communications with students, from the welcome e-mail to assignment feedback, are opportunities to build rapport if done effectively. It is helpful to ensure that all communications are positive, professional, clear, and friendly. The tone of communications must be professional to establish respect for the faculty member but also friendly and respectful to students. Using the student's name in e-mails and assignment feedback makes communication more friendly and personal even though an instructor may cut and paste some standard comments. For example, an instructor might develop and format some feedback about how to improve the bibliography for the assignment and insert that comment into several students' assignments, but it can be made personal by adding the student's name and/or assignment topic. For example,

"[Tom], you have included a number of good references in your bibliography for your research on [starting a business in India]. However, be sure to check your APA manual to put your citations into correct APA format, and also be sure to start your bibliography on a new page."

A good way to build rapport with students is to contact them by e-mail or phone at regular intervals to ask them how they are doing or if they need any help. At the end of the first week, mid-way through the course, and again toward the end of the course are good times to be in touch with students. In an online course, it would be easy for students to conclude that the instructor does not care or isn't present if there is little or no contact. By phoning or e-mailing regularly to check in on students, they realize that the instructor is a real person who cares about their progress in the course.

Posting regular announcements also helps to build rapport because it gives the impression to students that the instructor is anticipating their needs and questions. It makes a far better impression to post a timely announcement rather than the student having to post a question and wait twenty-four hours for an

answer when he/she could have been working on the assignment that generated the question.

Use a friendly tone when communicating with students and use encouraging language. For example:

Hi Brendan,

Thank you for your e-mail with the questions about your grade for last week's case study. I understand that you're disappointed in your grade. I've reviewed your assignment again to make sure that I didn't miss anything, but having done so I am comfortable that your grade is fair and accurate according to the assignment grading rubrics. I've included some additional feedback inside the attached file to help clarify the assignment for you. Please review my additional comments, and then let me know if you have any further questions.

Finally, the process of posting a photo in the course that shows the instructor smiling and looking approachable and professional, along with an introduction that relates the instructor's credentials, will garner the students' respect for the faculty member, while also sending a friendly and approachable message. In their introductions instructors might include some personal information, such as mentioning a hobby, a love for travel, information about family or pets, to reinforce that a real live person is facilitating the course.

Be Present

Instructors should regularly post to the discussion board, four to six days per week, to carefully manage the discussion in order to cover learning objectives and to demonstrate presence in the classroom. It is not enough to look at or read the posts in the discussions; if students don't see their instructor regularly posting to the discussion board they may assume that the instructor is not engaged in the course. If instructors cannot post daily, they should advise the class at the beginning of the course when to expect them to be online, and it should be consistent. For example,

"I will be in the course six days a week, and I usually do my online work either from about nine to eleven a.m. or else later in the evening. I take Saturdays off, so you won't see me on Saturdays, but you will see me in the course on the other six days of the week."

It has already been mentioned that timely responses to student questions and e-mails helps to build rapport and demonstrates the instructor's presence in the classroom.

It is important that instructors grade and return assignments in a timely manner. A good guideline is to return discussion participation grades within forty-eight hours of the end of the week and written assignments within the week. Forcing a student to wait an excessive amount of time for an assignment to be graded and returned can leave the impression that the instructor is not present or available.

Motivate, Respect, and Encourage

Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment: Supporting Adult Learners (n.d.) states that motivation is important to student success and that students can be motivated by making them active participants in their learning by asking them to write, create, design, and problem solve. Whenever possible it is best to offer students some choice in their learning by allowing them to select between two options, such as to answer question A or B, or to choose their own research project topic. When students have the freedom to choose to invest their time in something that is most interesting to them, experience has shown that they remain more motivated. Variety also keeps students interested and motivated, so it is best to incorporate different learning strategies such as brainstorming, discussions, demonstrations, case studies, presentations, or team work. Different communication tools and learning activities also facilitate better comprehension for students with different learning styles (Literacy Source, n.d.).

Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker (2003) recommend that instructors guide the direction of the discussion, help to sort out

key points, and help students to focus on the learning objectives in order to focus class discussions. They also recommend that instructors allow students the opportunity for multiple points of view. Additionally, instructors should organize the discussion threads so that they are easy to follow and don't become overwhelming. This can be accomplished by providing some instructions to students about how to manage their posts and also by setting an example when posting. Depending on the learning platform used, instructions will vary.

Students should be encouraged to demonstrate their learning and knowledge. This can be accomplished by designing assignments that require students to apply the course concepts rather than simply repeating information. Case studies and Internet "field trips" are good examples of applied assignments that allow students this opportunity to demonstrate their learning (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2003).

An instructor who is enthusiastic about the course keeps students motivated. Instructors can encourage students to participate in the discussions by enticing them with easy questions at the beginning of the week when they may not yet have had an opportunity to complete the readings. This can then draw them in to the more challenging and difficult questions as the discussion progresses. Instructors should praise students for their responses to encourage them to post again. Students should also be asked to offer their own experience, expertise, examples, and opinions in discussions to support the concepts covered in the assigned readings. Lastly, instructors should thank them for sharing their experience.

Collison et al. (2003) identified some patterns of discussion that most commonly occur in online courses: social, argumentative, and pragmatic forms. They state that social and argumentative discussions tend to inhibit discussion while a pragmatic approach encourages a more productive discussion that helps students to meet learning objectives, builds community, and ensures a respectful environment. It is important to regularly monitor the discussions to keep posts relevant and pragmatic (Collison et al., 2003).

Occasionally students may post unprofessional or argumentative comments in a discussion forum. It is important to address

this immediately by contacting the student outside the classroom by e-mail or telephone to let him/her know that it is not acceptable to post derogatory, argumentative, or unprofessional comments in the discussions. This type of behavior can intimidate or discourage other students from posting or can develop into an out of control or off-topic discussion. To avoid this type of behavior in discussions, some description of what is considered civil and professional conduct in the discussions can be posted in an announcement to let students know what is expected of them in their postings (Bender, 2003).

And, finally, instructors must practice patience. If students don't understand something the first time, instructors should find another way to explain it by using a different communication tool (chat, phone) or different words. Respect all students by using a positive, friendly tone in all communications and feedback. Some students can be challenging, but no matter how challenging they are or how frustrated an instructor might become with a student, it is always important to be respectful and encouraging in communication with students. When frustrated with a student, it's a good idea to draft a response and save it for later review before sending it.

Reach Out

Students are often too shy, embarrassed, or reserved to ask for help, so when an instructor observes that a student is having difficulty in the course, it is best to reach out to students by e-mail or telephone and offer help. Signs that students may be having difficulty include poor performance on assignments, quizzes, or exams; incorrect information posted on the discussion board; absence from the course; or consistently late assignments. Some additional points to consider when reaching out to students include:

- It is a best practice for building rapport to check in by e-mail or phone with **all** students on a regular basis to see how the course is going and offer assistance if needed.

Sending regular announcements and e-mailing them to the students so they don't miss them may also prompt students to respond with questions or feedback.

- When possible an optional survey can be incorporated into the discussion forum midway through the course to solicit feedback from students. This offers students an opportunity to provide feedback about both the course and the instructor while time remains to make changes for the last half of the course.
- Having regular office hours and encouraging students to call if they need help makes instructors available to offer assistance. Instructors can offer to meet in a chat room or on the phone if a two-way conversation will be more effective to accomplish what's needed.
- A discussion forum for questions and answers about the course should be included and checked regularly and responded to in a timely manner. By positioning this discussion forum at the top of the discussion board the instructor will ensure that questions are not missed.
- Students experiencing difficulty in a course can be encouraged to work together in informal groups. Those having more difficulty may be encouraged to contact student services or advising for additional help with language issues or to get outside tutoring (Center for Enhancement of Learning & Teaching, 2008).

Sample assignments or tips for completing the assignments should be posted when appropriate. This can be done by announcement when an instructor anticipates that students may have questions about an assignment; or if several students have asked the same question, all students should receive the clarification while working on the assignment. For a final exam, a special discussion forum can be set up to answer questions about how to prepare. This is in addition to any proactive communication on the part of the instructor that offers specific guidance regarding the content that will be included on the final exam (Center for Enhancement of Learning & Teaching, 2008).

Build Community

The dropout rates in online courses are significantly higher than in traditional courses, and a primary reason is the feeling of isolation among online students; to encourage students not to drop out, instructors can help to build a supportive community for their students (Vesely, Bloom, & Sherlock, 2007).

Vesely, Bloom and Sherlock (2007) point out that the concept of learning communities has been discussed for more than two decades and that research shows that functioning in a community enhances learning by community members. Community has been defined in the education literature in many different ways. Vesely, Bloom and Sherlock summarize common elements of community as follows:

1. A sense of shared purpose;
2. Establishment of boundaries defining who is a member and who is not;
3. Establishment and enforcement of rules/policies regarding community behavior;
4. Interaction among members; and
5. A level of trust, respect, and support among community members (p. 2).

Collison et al. (2003) stated that students desire a sense of community within the online learning environment and that the instructor can guide students through their dialog. In discussion forums students should be encouraged to directly respond to each other's posts rather than simply posting a monologue. When discussions are interactive, students build rapport and a sense of community and consequently learn more because they are actually discussing the course concepts rather than posting individual posts that do not relate to each other.

Instructors can create a class conversation area using a chat room or discussion forum to encourage students to help and support each other. Students can be encouraged to communicate with each other outside the online classroom by exchanging e-mails if they so choose. Some learning management systems

facilitate sending e-mails from inside the course so that students and instructors can easily communicate.

Team assignments can be used when appropriate and should be carefully monitored to ensure success. Not all students enjoy working on team assignments, as they are concerned that their teammates may not contribute equally to the workload or will produce work that is of a lesser standard, thereby impacting the team's evaluation. Team assignments also take more time to complete. Teams can be successful if the instructor sets clear expectations, makes suggestions about how to function effectively as a team, and monitors the team discussions daily. The instructor may need to follow up with students who do not start participating early to ensure that the team gets started and that everyone participates. No grades should be given for individual submissions and students must participate on the team to receive a grade.

Keep the Material Relevant

An instructor can make the content of an online course come alive by incorporating his or her practical experience into the course. This can be done in the discussions by offering examples to support the course concepts being discussed. Students can also bring their experience to the course, especially students who have strong work experience or when the student body is diverse in cultural and geographic backgrounds. Students should be encouraged to share their experience; instructors can provide exercises that facilitate researching relevant current events, current research, or current processes.

Questions in online discussions should be stimulating and open ended. Select topics that offer an opportunity to share personal experiences and build on the concepts in the assigned readings. Avoid closed-ended questions that can be answered with a yes or no answer. Instructors can encourage students to respond with succinct and clear comments. Posts that are too long may discourage other students from participating in the discussion or responding to the specific long comments (Bender, 2003).

Conclusion

Students who feel encouraged, respected, and supported in their online courses are more likely to continue and to succeed. Teaching online is different from teaching in a physical classroom, and different practices are relevant to anyone who is currently teaching online or who may be transitioning from a physical classroom to a virtual classroom or teaching a hybrid course.

Implementing best practices online techniques will enhance the online experience for both faculty and students by providing an effective and supportive online classroom:

- communicate clearly and often
- set expectations
- offer constructive and timely feedback
- build rapport
- be present
- respect, encourage, and motivate students
- reach out to them
- build community
- keep course content relevant.

Utilizing these practices should create an effective online experience for students that will result in better learning and higher retention rates in online courses.

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