

## Netiquette: Make it Part of Your Syllabus

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### Abstract

Just like in face-to-face classes, students engaged in online education communicate, participate and interact via computer-mediated discussions (CMDs). While online instructors presumably monitor the CMDs' contents and undercurrents, it is recommended that specific rules are set to ensure that students comply with established online classroom etiquette or "netiquette." Developing netiquette rules at the onset of the course and including these guidelines in the students' course syllabus can help avoid future conflicts.

**Keywords:** Discussions, Interactions, Online course etiquette, Conflicts

### Introduction

There appears to be a common misconception that today's rubric of distance education is similar to that of a correspondence course. This could not be further from the truth. In fact, the current technology-mediated learning environments are quite sophisticated. Students can be completely engaged in the interaction, communication and participation in a virtual classroom. They are able to forge strong relationships and connections with other online learners (Al-Shalchi 2009). Indeed, Maurino (2006) has suggested that online students tend to be more interactive than their counterparts in the traditional face-to-face classroom. Despite the lack of physical presence, they still feel more connected, are more willing to express non-popular opinions, and have more avenues for continuous participation.

When online students actively participate in classroom discussion and engage in idea exchange dynamics, the computer-mediated discussion (hereafter CMD) threads then become a forum for diverse thought processes, opinions and communication styles. Subsequently, this type of forum becomes a critical element for online learning and is consistent with Wells' (2001) point that, "knowing is largely carried out through discourse" (p. 184).

Indeed, it has been these authors' experience that the discussion forum can be a critical learning tool for online students. They can learn from each others' different experiences and knowledge as evident in their discussion postings and online chats. More importantly, the interaction among students in terms of how they respond to each other and the depth of their responses can determine whether online discussions will flourish (McCrary et al. 2008).

While discussions and/or discourse can be quite productive to the learning experience, they can also pose potential problems. This is because disruptive and impolite behaviors, through posted comments, discussion rebuttals or emails, can occur at any time. As a result, the tone is set for a dysfunctional online classroom setting (Shallert et al. 2009). It is therefore incumbent on the instructor to ensure that online discussion etiquette is followed (Lujan 2008). Otherwise, the dynamics necessary to provide healthy

avenues for online interaction may be damaged resulting in students' hesitation to participate in subsequent discussions for fear of disparaging remarks or further attacks (Hunt 2009).

#### *Online Etiquette*

Recently, a student in a graduate-level online course sent the following e-mail to his instructor:

*... I have observed that some students' discussions are at the line or crossing the line... I am specifically referring to discussions which delve into personal attacks or personal disagreements as opposed to staying in the realm of healthy topical discussions in which students may disagree about the topical areas in appropriate academic banter...*

Given the above student's comments, what should the instructor do? How can the instructor avoid this situation in the future?

CMD allows students to seek and provide information, provide social comments, share experiences and present ideas (Schallert et al. 2009). Because students can be less inhibited in an online classroom environment compared to face-to-face settings (Suler 2004), demonstrating nice or polite behaviors is critical. As Yang et al. (2006) suggest, polite CMD environments foster a sense of community among students and motivate participation in the learning process.

#### *Netiquette*

Since discussions are instrumental to the success of distance education (Al-Shalchi 2009), it is important that healthy and productive interactive environments are maintained. Otherwise, the repercussions may lead to the general "failure" of the discussion component of the entire course and/or for the remainder of the course. Herein lies the importance of having an established classroom etiquette and/or protocol as well as clearly defined consequences.

*Netiquette*, or Internet etiquette, is a way of defining professionalism through network communication. Its derivation is based on the merging of the words "network" as well as "etiquette;" and, the concept is closely related to ethics (Scheuermann & Taylor 1997). Netiquette refers to a set of core rules that delineates what should and should not be done with regards to online communication in order to maintain common courtesy (Shea 1994). In other words, in a classroom setting, netiquette deals with the proper decorum in online learning and CMD. For virtual classroom purposes, netiquette deals with the notions of respect, harmony and tolerance often manifested in the tone or function of the interactions (Conrad 2002; Curtis and Lawson 2001; Brown 2001).

Researchers have suggested that online students generally have a clear understanding of what is within the realm of acceptable netiquette. There is a prevailing environment of "groupness," "cohesiveness," and "community" (Schallert et al. 2009), where students acknowledge the need to be considerate of others' feelings as well as follow unwritten social "niceness" mores (Conrad 2002). This is probably why the quality of and participation in online discussion increases when netiquette is observed by students in both synchronous and asynchronous platforms (Schallert et al. 2009; Buelens et al. 2007).

#### *Playing Devil's Advocate*

Conrad (2002) concurs that online students generally try to avoid conflict and try to "be nice" to each other. However, she also mentions that a "little controversy to stir things up" may be inevitable (p.204). In these situations, it is imperative that the instructor step in and rectify any breach in conduct (Anderson et al. 2001).

Interestingly, Yang et al. (2006) reported that when students get too absorbed with being "nice," learning is hampered or interrupted. In the interest of preserving harmony, some students may hesitate to express dissenting opinions or to disrupt group cohesiveness (Yang et al. 2006). Moreover, Buelens et al. (2007) found that netiquette guidelines alone did not affect the number of questions, arguments and ungrounded statements posted by students. Instead, what Buelens et al. (2007) found was that netiquette guidelines in tandem with didactic [teaching] guidelines were both necessary to improve the quality of the group discussion.

#### **Netiquette in the Classroom**

A quick search on the Internet generated results of several educational institutions providing Netiquette policies, or what appears to be derivations of it, in their respective school websites. These policies were embedded within the Student Code of Conduct, Academic Honesty Policy or University/Student Code of Ethics. While this approach is certainly acceptable, it begs the question of how many students actually

read, or even glance over, the mandated student conduct rules.

Therefore, it is imperative for instructors to clearly define netiquette expectations and consequences of any breach for each of their courses as well as be actively engaged in CMDs. Perhaps, this may be why Buelens et al. (2007) suggested that in order for netiquette rules to be effective, didactic guidelines have to be presented as well.

As Ragan (2007) noted, these netiquette rules should be distributed at the start of a course. In fact, based on these authors' personal experiences, it is highly recommended that course netiquette do's and don'ts should be included in the syllabus to further underscore the importance of harmony and respect within the online learning environment. When included in the syllabus, students become more aware that the netiquette rules ought to be viewed much like a course requirement. By including these guidelines within the course syllabus, a sense of importance and urgency is conveyed. And, for practicality purposes, this increases the likelihood that the guidelines are actually read by the students.

Outlined below are some of the commonly utilized Netiquette rules. Included in Appendix A is a sub-section of a syllabus that includes Netiquette guidelines for a graduate-level course.

- Do not dominate any discussion. Give other students the opportunity to join in the discussion.
- Do not use offensive language. Present ideas appropriately.
- Be cautious in using Internet language. For example, do not capitalize all letters since this suggests shouting.
- Popular emoticons such as ☺ or ☹ can be helpful to convey your tone but do not overdo or overuse them.
- Avoid using vernacular and/or slang language. This could possibly lead to misinterpretation.
- Never make fun of someone's ability to read or write.
- Share tips with other students.
- Keep an "open-mind" and be willing to express even your minority opinion. Minority opinions have to be respected.
- Think and edit before you push the "Send" button.
- Do not hesitate to ask for feedback.
- Using humor is acceptable but be careful that it is not misinterpreted. For example, are you being humorous or sarcastic?

## Conclusion

Online students can bring to the discussion table diverse ideas that enhance the online learning experience. Unfortunately, along with this diversity comes the possibility that students may, inadvertently or intentionally, breach netiquette rules. In order to avoid any unpleasant situation, it is highly recommended that instructors include in their syllabus an outline detailing his/her netiquette expectations. Whereas some educational institutions may have broad policies regarding off- and online classroom etiquette, it is prudent for instructors to proactively deter future breach of conduct by specifically indicating in their syllabus the rules and the consequences.

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#### APPENDIX A: Sample Netiquette Guideline

*Netiquette* is a way of defining professionalism through network communication. Students who violate proper Netiquette will be administratively dropped by Professor XXX from the course.

Here are some Student Guidelines for the class:

- Do not dominate any discussion.
- Do not use offensive language.
- Never make fun of someone's ability to read or write.
- Use simple English.
- Use correct spelling and grammar.
- Share tips with other students.
- Keep an "open-mind" and be willing to express even your minority opinion.
- Be aware of the University's Academic Honesty Policy.
- Think before you push the "Send" button.
- Do not hesitate to ask for feedback.
- When in doubt, always check with your instructor for clarification.

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