

Communication Skills

1. Acceptable use

The use of public computer facilities is normally governed by an acceptable use policy which sets the rules that control that control how you use the system (e.g. when and how you can use technology and what you can do with it). Many public learning centres employ filtering software to limit your access to and use of internet.

2. Some factors when using communication technologies

Cultural differences: online learning removes the geographical barriers that separate learners, giving you a chance to study with learners from many other cultures.

Libel: e-mail and other forms of online communication are governed by the laws of libel and defamation.

Privacy and security: there are several steps you can take to protect your messages and system including home security, encrypting files, using passwords and employing firewalls.

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3. Asynchronous communication

e-Mail is an asynchronous communication method and probably the most widely used one. It has many advantages in that you can send messages at any time to one or many people with or without attachments. In a similar way, you have the freedom to read messages when it is convenient. People read and send messages in many different and complex ways.

4. e-Mail communication styles

It is relatively easy to offend people unintentionally, perhaps owing to the short and informal way many people write e-mails. This is probably increased by the speed and ease of an e-mail message. It is important always to send polite e-mails and never to respond in anger to a message.

Most e-mails are written in an informal style which is friendly but can sometimes be difficult to understand. It is important to concentrate on replying in a way that is clear to your receiver.

5. Mailgroups and newsgroups

Mailgroups and newsgroups are communities of interest that allow you to participate in discussions about their topic. Groups cover almost all subjects (e.g. business, computing and science). You need to register with a group in order to take part - this will involve giving your name and e-mail address. Many newsgroups and mailgroups are moderated. Moderators essentially referee the discussion although their role in education is to facilitate the debate.

6. Organisation

You can receive very large numbers of e-mail, especially if you participate in mailgroups. Outlook® software and other e-mail systems provide various features to organise your e-mails, letting you save them, segregate different types of messages, create new folders and remove spam.

7. Mailgroup digests and summaries

Many mailgroups publish a regular digest or summary of the discussion (e.g. weekly or monthly). It allows you to maintain an interest in the discussion without having to read the many individual messages. In any public forum you should never give your name or any personal details.

8. Threaded discussion

In many forms of online discussion the debate can be shown as a threaded discussion. A threaded presentation shows you the sequences and relationships between messages, enabling you to understand the relationship between the different themes being discussed.

9. Lurking

Many participants of mailgroups send very few messages. This behaviour is called lurking, and has been described as the equivalent of not asking questions in a class while listening to the questions and answers from other students and tutors.

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10. Blogging

Blogs are often described as diaries but they differ significantly in that they are public documents that your peers will read and comment on. Entries and comments may be used as e-portfolio evidence.

One approach to writing blog entries is to make some general notes, draft a reflective entry and then check it (e.g. spell check).

Reflection: reflective writing and blogs are fundamentally linked together. Reflective writing is not about producing simple descriptions of activities or summaries but rather about considering the implications about your own feelings and actions, and how they relate to other knowledge and experience.

Commenting on blogs: many courses ask that students read and comment on their peers' blogs. In commenting on your colleagues, it is important to remember the normal rules of netiquette and always to be constructive, objective and helpful.

11. Synchronous communication

Synchronous communication requires that participants take part simultaneously. There are three main synchronous communication methods:

- *Chat:* chat allows you to communicate using text messages in real time, rather like a conversation. It has been used to simulate the types of informal communication had by learners meeting face-to-face.

- *Audio conferencing*: the critical factor in an audio conference is that you do not have the benefit of nonverbal communications. It is important to provide an organised and controlled event - this is mainly the role of the tutor.

In order to gain the most benefit from an audio conference participants need to:

- prepare in advance;
- keep a record of the discussion;
- concentrate on the discussion.

Audio conferences are most useful:

- when they concentrate on a limited topic;
- when they limit participation to a small group;
- when they focus on agreed objectives.

The key to successful audio conferencing is preparation.

- *Video conferencing*: this is broadly similar to audio conferencing but not as limited in non-verbal communications. There are a wide variety of ways of organising a video conference such as:
 - tutor remote from a group or several groups of learners;
 - tutor located with a group, other remote individuals or groups of learners being linked by video conference to them;
 - everyone separated.

Communication skills will vary depending on the structure of the conference. Some general points are that:

- they limit the opportunity for each participant to contribute;
- there is a tendency to be formal and highly organised.

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In order to gain the most benefit from video conferencing you need to:

- prepare in advance;
- keep a record of the discussion;
- concentrate on the discussion;
- remember that sometimes people can see and hear you even when you are not contributing.

Video conferences are most useful when:

- they concentrate on a limited topic;
- they focus on decision-making;
- they limit participation to a small group;
- they provide a tutorial;
- they allow a co-operative group to meet.

The key to successful video conferencing is preparation.

Assessing your communication skills

The activity below (Online learning communication skills assessment) provides an opportunity to assess your communication skills.

Online learning communication skills assessment		
Table 1 provides a structure for you to assess your current level of skill and what opportunities you aim to take in order to develop your skills.		
Table 1 Online learning communication skills assessment		
Skill	Current skill level	Opportunities to develop skill
e-Mail Mailgroups Newsgroups Blog Chat Audio conferencing Video conferencing		
Discussion		
Table .2 Personalised online learning communication skills assessment		
Skill	Current skill level	Opportunities to develop skill
e-Mail	I have been using e-mail for several years.	I have never really used a threaded system. I will change the display of my e-mail editor to display the communication threads to learn more about this approach.
Mailgroups	Occasionally I have joined mailgroups but I have rarely sent messages.	I will join some mailgroups that are relevant to my course and try to participate regularly in the discussion.
Newsgroups	I have only occasionally joined a newsgroup and never for very long.	I will join some relevant newsgroups and review their value over a four-week period.
Blog	I have never used a blog or created a learning diary	I will visit a range of educational blogs in order to gain an appreciation of the writing styles and approaches taken. When I am confident I will start my own learning diary.
Chat	I have never used a chat room.	I will register with a chat service and take part in some sessions to explore them.
Audio conferencing	I have never taken part in an audio conference.	I will seek to participate in audio conferencing to gain an insight into this method.
Video conferencing	I have only taken part in one type of video conferencing where two groups meet through the technology.	I will seek to gain experience of other types of video conferencing especially participating at home via a low-speed line.