

WTMOC Communicating Expectations (Transcript)

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WTMOC Communicating Expectations (Slide 1)

The ability to effectively communicate expectations is dramatically affected by the shift from teaching in-person to teaching online. My name is Melanie Coughlin and I'm offering a few principles and their possible applications to guide communication in a solely web-based context.

Communicating Expectations: In-Person Course (Slide 2)

There are many cultural norms that invisibly support our successful in-person teaching. For example, 'everybody knows' that we discuss the course outline on the first day of class, so every student knows that if they don't attend those classes, they will have to learn about expectations another way.

Now in an online context, what does a student need to do accomplish this basic understanding of expectations? The answer is, it differs greatly, depending on the course. A lack of consistent norms across web-based courses means that we have to think more carefully about the gaps between an instructor's image of a course and the various images of the same course alive in the minds and plans of the course participants.

Based on my personal experiences of successes and failures teaching online, I'm recommending three principles to help you bridge these gaps.

Communicating Expectations: Web-Based Course (Slide 3)

Principles for Communicating Effectively:

1. Don't surprise them: communicate **early**
2. Don't expect them to know where they need to be: communicate **widely**
3. 3. Don't repeat yourself: communicate **supportively**

All together, these principles avoid negative outcomes ranging from an overwhelming number of emails asking the same questions to terrible assignments where even average-performing students fail to meet your expectations. So let's consider some possible applications of these three principles one by one.

Principle 1. Don't Surprise Them (Slide 4)

Think about the following examples of how to communicate **early** and whether they would work for you and your courses:

- You could send an email even just to say 'hi' a week or two before your course begins; this is also a great way to distribute a course accessibility survey so that you and your course participants can think of possible obstacles and crucial solutions before the semester gets underway.

- You could create a module called 'Assignment Descriptions' that is just for your detailed assignments instructions and grading rubrics. These can start off basic and develop more detail as the course continues;
- You could use the announcements forum regularly to focus participants at the beginning of each week.
- All assignments submission activities and quizzes created with a due date are automatically linked to your gradebook and represented in the culearn calendar. I'd recommend setting these up right at the beginning of your course—even they are just empty shells at first, these can still function as powerful reminders of what's coming up.
- Finally I'd suggest allotting at least three weeks of active focus for any substantial assignment—in my experience, this gives course participants the minimum time they need to submit quality work.

Principle 2: Don't Expect Them to Know Where They Need to Be (Slide 5)

The most important way to communicate **widely** online is to:

- Create an Ask Your Instructor Forum so that non-private questions about course materials and forms of assessment benefit everyone fairly.
- Other more emotive ways include creating an optional Self-Introduction and Find a Study Buddy forum and a Course Participants' Coffee Shop forum
- Low-stake, automatically graded quizzes are another mode of communication that check basic comprehension of the materials and keep everyone moving through the modules
- And finally, whether your web-based course is synchronous or asynchronous, I highly recommend creating an Online Meeting Room and then using an automated appointment scheduler (such as Calendly or YouCanBookMe) to set up one-on-one meetings

Now one might consider Principle 2 and wonder why I haven't suggested "repeat yourself everywhere and all the time" as a possible application. On the contrary:

Principle 3 Don't Repeat Yourself (Slide 6)

By 'supportively' I mean, think about how various participants are connecting with your course and then build in links to improve the quality of those connections. Examples of when and how to do this could be to:

- Include links in your weekly announcements for currently relevant assignment descriptions and then
- Include the same links in the relevant assignment submission activities and I'd even recommend reminding participants about relevant readings for a particular assignment by placing links to the online Ares Library Reserves wherever they are most likely to use them. The reason why I recommend linking to Ares rather than to individual files is that the Library Reserves knows how to ensure that assigned readings are accessible for all of your course participants.
- In the same spirit, I always write descriptive links, e.g. instead of 'Click Here' or a bunch of internet address gibberish, I write Term Paper page in the Assignment Descriptions module (opens in new window). This format is not

only essential for course participants using screen readers; it reminds all participants where to find that information or resource if they decide to look it up later.

A Shift in Analogy (Slide 7)

It's worth observing that while it is most common to conceive of a course website as a new kind of classroom, in design terms your website is going to function much more like a campus, as your website comprises part of a network of learning resources. Negatively, a consequence of this network structure is that just because participants are on the website, that doesn't mean they know how to be in the right place at the right time. Positively, a consequence of the network structure is that you can directly affect your course participants' success by providing guidance early, by providing it widely, and by supporting their efforts to connect with the various parts of your course.

I've honestly enjoyed this chance to think more about my online teaching experiences and I hope some of these suggestions help you get the best out of yours.

Sources (Slide 8)

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