

## Using Communication to Help Students Learn

Communicating with students will affect their learning and their behaviors, so new teachers often wonder how to best establish and maintain clear lines of communication. Read the scenario below to see how two new teaching assistants are thinking about this issue.

*Cary and Audrey are friends who are both teaching for the first time: Cary is teaching Introduction to Environmental Science, and Audrey is teaching Introduction to Ethics. The courses are challenging and both teachers agree that communication with students will be a key to making sure that the semester is successful. Let's listen in on their conversation.*

*Cary: I've decided to spend time the first week of class reviewing the syllabus with students, especially the ground rules for appropriate etiquette for in-class discussions. I'm also going to emphasize the importance of coming to office hours and how to bring up questions in class and during office hours. Then as the semester progresses, I'm going to send reminders about deadlines. If students miss classes or turn assignments in late, I'll be sending warnings through email. I know sometimes students don't check email, so I'm going to emphasize the importance of checking email regularly as well as proper email etiquette. I've spelled all this out in the syllabus.*

*Audrey: It sounds like you're going to address all the most important things in your first couple of classes and that the semester should go pretty smoothly. I'm thinking about trying something a little different. At the start of each week, I'm going to have something called a share-out circle. Students will sit in a circle so I can see them and respond to questions that I ask them about how class is going, if they know and understand upcoming assignments, and how they are responding to complex ethical issues we're working with.*

Take a moment to consider these two approaches. Whose approach do you think will help establish greater communication with students?

It's not unusual for new teachers to consider communication in the ways described in this case. While both approaches are typical (and well-intentioned!), it is highly unlikely that the two new teachers will establish and keep the lines of communication open with their students.

### **The Role of Communication in Learning**

New teachers' beliefs about the role of communication in learning can lead them to adopt practices that may or may not be productive for student learning. For example, Cary sees communication as a way to ensure students follow rules, turn in assignments, and know how to contact the instructor. From this perspective, communication is simply the transmission of information from a teacher to his students (and only occasionally the other way around). While clear information can certainly play a role in communication, Cary's approach won't guarantee that students will read the syllabus or his emails. Simply codifying rules and policies does not help students understand and make the most of your course. In fact, this contractual approach to communication may turn students off and suggest to them that their questions, concerns, and needs are not something you really want to hear about.

What about Audrey’s approach? Instructors like Audrey see communication as a way to ensure that students can share feelings, questions, or insights of any kind. From this perspective, communication is an invitation from the teacher to the students to express themselves as they see fit. While sharing ideas and confusions is essential in communication and learning, this approach doesn’t necessarily ensure that students engage in this kind of exchange or engage in it meaningfully. Many students may find these kinds of unstructured opportunities confusing (even unpleasant!) because they have no real focus and don’t seem to lead to any actions or changes.

While these two approaches appear different on the surface, they both unintentionally make it difficult for students to engage in the exchange of ideas related to their learning experience. And this is the real purpose of communication in a college course—communication *for learning*. In fact, when we look at communication in any context, it is best understood as a collaborative and purposeful set of activities that prepares two or more people for an experience and sustains their collaboration during that experience. Understood this way, communication helps students get the most out of your course by actively involving them before and throughout the course (Nilson, 2013). Now that we have a better understanding of communication for learning, let’s see how you can use communication to collaboratively engage students in the exchange of ideas related to their learning.

**Before the semester begins: Use communication to prepare students and (and yourself!) for the learning experiences that they are going to have.**

Before the semester begins, you can establish initial communication with students by sending a “welcome letter” in the form of an email or Blackboard announcement a week or two before the course begins. An inviting welcome letter lets students know what they can expect from you and from the course. It also initiates an exchange with your students that will help them feel that you are already thinking about their learning and planning a successful semester for them. It is important to recognize that a welcome letter is different from a directive to read the syllabus before the semester begins or an explanation of class rules. Instead, it explains how you’ve deliberately and thoughtfully structured your course to help students learn. The letter gives you an opportunity to communicate your hopes for students’ learning, the kinds of opportunities they will have to practice and get feedback from you, and what they can expect from a typical week and in a typical class meeting. When students understand your role in the class and how they can connect with you and get support, they will be better prepared for the learning experiences that they’ll have in your course.

The first function of the welcome letter is to help students know what they can expect, but it also serves as an invitation for students to communicate with you. After you’ve provided some information about the course, take the opportunity to ask your students some questions that will help you learn about their preparation and expectations for the course. You can do this by including a link to a survey you’ve created or, if you have a smaller class, you might ask students to respond to your email. The questions you ask could, for example, help you consider what access to technology students have or help you learn about the prior courses students have taken in your discipline. Be sure you acknowledge what you’ve learned about students (while

protecting anonymity) and tell students at the beginning of the semester how you have made appropriate adjustments to your teaching. For example, if several students mention that this is their first upper level course in the discipline, provide two ways you will support all students as they develop their first longer project in the course to show them that you know they will need some extra help as they make this attempt. When your first communication with students involves a real exchange of information about the course, it invites students into what should be a semester-long conversation about the ways in which the course functions to support their learning.

At the end of this document, you'll find an example of a welcome letter that you can modify to fit your course.

### **The first week of class: Use communication to create a shared understanding of your course syllabus.**

In the first week of class, you can structure opportunities for students to engage with your syllabus through a collaborative exploration of that important document. Assign your syllabus as a reading with the promise that there will be a (low-stakes!) group quiz on the syllabus on the first or second day of class. This ensures that students will first read the syllabus on their own and then have an opportunity to dig into the syllabus with classmates to answer some key questions about how the course works. After students take your syllabus quiz in groups, share their answers, and get clarification on any confusions, you can keep them in groups and have them generate two group questions about how the course will work (Harrington & Thomas, 2018). This kind of real communication means that students invest energy in a structured exploration of the course rather than simply listen to you read the syllabus (which usually results in students zoning out and sets the expectation that students won't be doing much when they come to class meetings).

At the end of this document, you'll find examples of the kinds of syllabus quiz questions that will help students have a useful discussion about what to expect in your course.

### **The first week of class: Use communication to create shared expectations about course interactions.**

During the first week of class, structure a conversation with students that requires them to collaborate with one another to create a set of community expectations for productive and civil interaction in class or online. Begin this conversation by sharing some basic ideas about what good class citizenship might entail. For example, you might suggest that you think students should expect themselves and each other to (1) come prepared, (2) ask questions, and (3) respond thoughtfully to classmates. Write these three ideas on the board as an initial framework, and then have students work in small groups using this framework to begin a discussion about what they think will really help them learn from and with others. Tell them they can edit or revise these initial ideas or add to them with their own suggestions. When students are ready, each group should share their ideas, and you can edit your initial framework in response to these ideas. The final set of ideas for good class citizenship or community expectations should be made readily

available to students as a handout or in Blackboard. Because students helped structure these expectations, they will feel ownership of them and will be more likely to monitor their own and others' interactions to assure that these shared expectations are being upheld.

**Throughout the course: Use communication to help students make the most of the learning experiences they are having.**

We often think about communication as something that gets established at the beginning of the course and then we expect students to find their way through the different activities and assignments the course requires. We also expect them to know how to use the feedback we give them on their homework, papers, projects, and exams. But to make the most of the work in a course, students need opportunities to communicate to their teachers and to themselves about the work they're doing and how their skills and understanding are developing. When we require students to communicate about their learning orally and in writing, students discover and work through misunderstandings and gaps in their thinking as well as solidify new conceptual development and new skills (Nilson, 2013). There are three key ways to help students use communication to make the most of their learning.

First, be sure to create frequent opportunities for students to communicate their progress in one very basic way: require them to practice often! Frequent practice in class and out of class means that students are showing you (communicating with you!) about their current levels of understanding. New teachers may forget that students need to demonstrate their thinking frequently so that they can get feedback on their weaknesses and strengths. All too often teachers only give a couple of exams during the semester or assign one big project. This means that students really don't have the opportunity for informative exchanges with you in the form of smaller assignments or short activities where you can catch mistakes and confusions and help resolve them (Angelo & Cross, 1992). When students are given the opportunity to respond to short activities and problems regularly throughout the semester, they are able to communicate their thinking quickly to you and you can respond in turn with small suggestions: these small steps of communication result in great learning.

Next, as students practice and get feedback on their thinking, require them to reflect on how that thinking is developing. If we don't ask students to reflect on their developing thinking, they often simply engage with each assignment or activity as a discrete experience, disconnected from other learning experiences or other parts of the course (Nilson, 2013). To help students make the most of their learning, ask students to communicate with you about their progress by having them write short in-class reflections. You can ask students to write for two minutes at the end of each class and describe a question, a confusion, or a realization. Collect these "minute papers" and at the next class meeting start the class by answering questions, clarifying areas of confusion and celebrating new realizations. Students also need similar structures to help them make the most of your feedback, so it is helpful to require students to articulate how they will use the feedback that they are getting to improve on their next assignments. This can take the form of students writing a short memo to themselves (and sharing it with you) about one or two areas that they will improve on in the next assignment or assessment. By checking in with you in these small ways,

students begin to understand how the course works to help them learn and they are able to identify areas where they need support and improvement. This can result in students feeling empowered to come to you for help because they understand that you want them to reach out to you and have provided structures to help them consider their own learning and development.

Finally, students can reflect with you on your course by completing an [Early Semester Survey](#), a service provided by ITLAL, which provides an anonymous survey that allows your students to confidentially communicate what is working in the class and make concrete suggestions about the course.

### ***Example of a Welcome Letter***

Dear students,

I hope this email finds you safe and healthy. As the summer starts to wind down, we are all starting to think about and plan for fall. While we all hope that we are moving toward a more “normal” academic year, I know many of you may still be feeling uncertain about what to expect when the semester begins. That’s the reason I’m reaching out to you—to remove some of that uncertainty. I’ve been spending time the past several weeks developing plans to ensure that the course you’re taking with me is a positive and effective learning experience. I’m writing to check in, tell you a little bit about our course, and gather some information from you that I can use to make sure this semester is successful for you and all students!

First, let me tell you a little bit about our course. Our course is what’s called a “100% In-Person Course,” which means that we will meet face-to-face during our scheduled class meeting times. We’ll also use Blackboard for some highly interactive experiences: you will watch video lectures, have discussions, do activities, and work together in other ways. We’ll also use some tools in Blackboard to communicate, and for you to do and submit various assignments. When the semester starts, I’ll give you detailed information about what will happen during class meetings, how to prepare for them, and how I have planned those meetings so that you will learn and succeed this semester. I’ll also introduce you to the Blackboard tools we’ll be using. And, most importantly, I’ll explain how we will stay safe when we meet, following all the safety recommendations that will keep us healthy!

Now that you know a little bit more about how we’ll be learning together this coming semester, it’s time for me to ask you some questions so that I have the right information to ensure that our course is successful. *(At this point in your email to students, direct them to answer these questions by emailing their responses to you or by clicking on a link to go to a survey.)*

Thank you for taking the survey. I am sure that other instructors will be asking you similar questions, but it is so important for us to learn about your situation so that we can make the best plans for the fall. I’m excited to meet you soon and I wish you continued health as you enjoy the rest of your break! Be in touch!

### ***Examples of Questions on a Syllabus Quiz***

Based on your reading of the syllabus, answer the following questions. (In each case, give students 3-5 reasonable options to choose from.)

- Which of the short papers you'll be writing this semester will likely require the most research?
- Of the following three strategies, which will be most helpful for preparing the readings for class discussion?
- Which is the best approach to use if you need assistance with the homework?
- About how many hours should you set aside each week to work outside of class on papers?
- Which of the following skills do you think the course will help you with the most?

### **Resources to engage students in communication for learning**

Angelo, T.A., & Cross, K.P. (1992). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass.

Harrington, C., & Thomas, M. (2018). *Designing a motivating Syllabus*. Stylus Publishing.

Nilson, L. B. (2013). *Creating self-regulated learners: Strategies to strengthen students' self-awareness and learning skills*. Stylus Publishing.

If you'd like to learn more about using communication to help your students learn, please feel free to [request a consultation](#) with ITLAL.