

# Encouraging Student Voice with D, E, & I Based Online Communication Standards

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## Abstract

Over the years, studies have documented the importance of social interaction on student learning. However, there is a lack of information on how negative interaction impacts student learning. Given both the increase of online and hybrid learning, along with the increased toxicity in online communities on the Internet; the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion based online communication standards for online courses is imperative. As part of a faculty learning community at my institution, I completed a project where I involved my students in developing a new set of DEI-based “Online Communication Standards” to replace the outdated “Netiquette Rules” used by many online courses. This project has led to an ongoing research project to discover the impacts that negative online communication has on distance learning.

## Introduction

There have been many studies conducted on the positive impact of social interaction on student learning, but very little on how negative interaction impacts the learning process (Xie, 2013). Common sense would suggest that negative

interaction should negatively impact student learning. As an educator, I have seen how important community and a sense of belonging has on student success.

Anyone who uses the Internet has undoubtedly seen many examples of negative online communication. In the article *Angry by design: toxic communication and technical architectures*, Munn argues that decisions made during an online platform's design can promote negative online communication (Munn, 2020). If that, in fact, is true, logic dictates that we should be designing our online learning environments to give our students opportunities to engage in positive online communications.

### **D, E, & I in Online Communication**

It only takes a small amount of exposure to social media to see that much of the negative communication comes from the fact that people refuse to see that Internet users are a diverse group of people, with a wide array of diverse experiences and opinions on any given subject. The anonymity of the Internet contributes to this issue. It is much easier to shout down others and tell them they are wrong, because there are no consequences. It takes much more brain power to recognize that inclusion entails, thinking about the topic from another's perspective and then including them in the conversation. As in many areas of daily life, it is natural for us as humans to take the easy route.

I argue that the first step in encouraging student voice in our courses is to establish the framework that encourages our students to think before reacting. We must help our students to recognize the diversity of the people and ideas that they encounter in our classes, and then show them how to communicate and learn from each other without shutting down debate.

### **Online Communications Standards Project**

During the academic year of 2021-2022, I was accepted into a faculty learning community at my university. For this community, I needed to develop a project that I would implement during the year. I am a web developer, with expertise in accessibility and I have worked hard to make sure my online courses are accessible, so the next logical step is to start making my courses more

equitable and inclusive. After much thought, I decided to start this process by developing new diversity, equity and inclusion based online communication standards for my courses.

I have taught online for many years, and have seen an evolution in the field. With the growth of technology resources available for online learning, and with the increase in the number of students who have been using online communications on the Internet; it has become apparent that using traditional “Netiquette” for online course communications no longer benefits, nor facilitates, inclusive online communication in courses.

Netiquette was developed during the early days of the Internet. Most of those using the Internet during this time were researchers and systems administrators. The primary goal of Netiquette was to teach people to conserve computing resources because of the limitations of the technology of the time. Today, the technology we use is infinitely better than the technology used in the early 1970s, which renders many Netiquette rules moot. The other component of this is the people: the people using the Internet now are not “computer people”. George Margolin summed up the problem well when he said:

All of a sudden you have this enormous influx of people who are not computer people. Try a 17-year-old druggie and tell me how he is going to behave on the Net. The etiquette of the Net will be no greater than the etiquette of the general population (Gornstein, 1999).

As I scroll through my social media, I see a lot of anecdotal evidence that proves he is correct.

Throughout my career, I have advocated for teaching digital citizenship skills across the curriculum. No matter what subjects our students are studying, technology will touch those subjects in many ways. So, I took this opportunity with my project to include my students. During the Spring Semester of 2022, I developed a lesson that I lead my students through in all of my courses. We started with a history lesson on Netiquette. This included how and why Netiquette came about, and how the changes in technology over the years have made most

traditional Netiquette standards outdated. After that history lesson, we discussed online communication. I asked students:

- What their experiences had been with online communication.
- What their experiences had been with online communication in their courses.
- How they felt about online communication.
- What they would like to see in new online communication standards.

As I had this discussion with my students, I was quite surprised by the responses I was getting. It was quite evident that students had really been thinking about the topic of online communication without truly understanding the importance of what they were thinking. Some important topics that stood out during the discussion were:

- The topics of respect and kindness.
- Respectfully disagreeing with others.
- The impact of anonymity in online communication.
- The importance of proper writing skills.

At the end of the discussion, I began to compile the responses from my students and I used these responses to write the new “Online Communication Standards”. Their responses fell into six general categories:

- Quality
- Professionalism
- Privacy
- Respect
- Tolerance
- Community Building

Once I had the standards written, I took them back to the students who contributed to them to get their input. The students were pleased with the results, and after some minor editing, I have the final version of the standards that I have moved forward with in my classes. I have made these available for use with a

Creative Commons Attribution license on my web site at [Online Communication Standards](#).

## **Conclusion**

Now that the Online Communication Standards project for the faculty learning community is complete, the research component of the project will begin. I have planned a research study for the upcoming Fall Semester. All classes, regardless of teaching modality, at UC Clermont have an online classroom in the learning management system. For that reason, all students at UC Clermont will be asked to complete a survey about online communication. In this survey, they will be comparing the new standards to traditional Netiquette. The survey will gather their input on the new standards, and their experience with online communication in their courses to determine the impact of negative online communication on student learning.

## **References**

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