

COMMUNICATION ON THE WEB

- situations of interaction, messages, feedback and guiding as well as techniques and technology

How do we function in a face-to-face communication situation? How do we function in a web-based communication situation while using digital tools?

How do these two situations differ? Or, how are they similar, and where do they differ? The teacher-student communication as a traditional face-to-face situation is familiar to us all. In communication that is based on discussion, the people involved are physically present. You can look the other person in the eye, hear his or her voice, and pay attention to pauses and gestures. You can sense their feelings, read the situation, and act accordingly. You can ask clarifying questions. You can take a break. You can be interactive during the communicative situation, listening to the other person and allowing them the room to express their thoughts and emotions.

How do we communicate in a web-based environment?

In written electronic communication we use words to send messages to individuals or groups. We do this every day by email, text messages and social media comments. We use one style when we message friends, where it doesn't matter so much what wording we use. Such communication may be quite spontaneous. The context and people involved influence the communicative situation.

When we communicate with students in written form, we need to think about the wording. We need to think about the sequence of words and the sequence of the things we are discussing. How do we start, what comes next, and how do we end the message? We need to think about what we should and shouldn't say. The electronic era may make our messages shorter. We use abbreviated communication, which may sometimes easily sound rude.

What is the meaning of messages and what do we achieve by them?

What is a message for? Do I want to enquire into something, guide, give feedback, or motivate? Do I want to bring something up, or ask about something? In electronic messages it is good to think beforehand about what you want the message to convey. This makes writing the message easier. If you want to give feedback you need to formulate the message very carefully and think about the ways you want to give the feedback. If the feedback is about something difficult, you need to be extra careful.

When you send emails or messages on a discussion board, you need to start by thinking about the title. Is the title in the form of a question? Does it contain the central information of the message? Titles are useful, because they are what the recipient will first see in the stream of messages. When you reply to a

message, you also need to think about whether you will keep the original title or change it to better cover your answer.

Each message has a recipient -- even on the web.

In a digital world sending and receiving messages is different from face-to-face communication. Sending and receiving messages is usually asynchronous, with the sender and recipient in different places. But sometimes we can send messages, read the reply immediately and then answer it immediately. In this case, communication is 'chat-like', and almost synchronous. Sometimes the challenge is that the writer is already thinking about the next message instead of waiting for the other person's message to arrive, and only then start to think about how to reply. Further, electronic messages always have the potential to be saved. This is another good reason to be careful about what one writes. Remember that all communication is interactive and will have an effect.

Synchronous communication during a video conversation

There is also synchronous digital communication. An example of this is a Facetime, Skype or WhatsApp video conversation. These are very close to interactive face-to-face discussions. In a video conversation we are simultaneously in an interactive situation with one or several persons. We can look at the same document or work on something simultaneously. Similarly, you could guide a student by looking at an image together and discussing it. In these situations, we communicate by talking, writing or reflecting together. Such collaboration is very useful, because you can work together without disturbance. Guiding via video discussions is a very effective way to work. The discussions can also be recorded, if both parties agree on this, and if such recordings would be useful.

You give feedback in various ways in the web.

But what is your idea of feedback?

What do we mean by feedback?

When giving feedback, we show appreciation for the other person's work, we show interest, we listen, and we show respect. Feedback is about saying 'thank you', but also about evaluation and ideas for further development. Feedback works as a mirror for the recipient.

Feedback may have different aims. You may want to motivate, guide and evaluate. The starting point of feedback should always be about development, and it should never discourage the recipient. Motivation adds energy to work and helps the student keep on going. Giving feedback is therefore also guiding. You guide to help with problem situations, and to clarify goals, aims, and working methods.

When feedback is about evaluation, you will discuss the students' skills, knowledge and sometimes attitudes. Feedback helps the students develop and learn. Feedback is important; it is a central part of learning. It is also an important part of our development as professionals.

Is everything always suitable for development? How do I take feedback? How do I take positive feedback and thanks? How do I take criticism and instructive feedback?

Think about those questions for a while.

Those were quite many questions to consider at one time.

So, what is the meaning of feedback for learning?

In feedback, we are used to thinking about evaluation, looking at what the student has achieved. However, you should also give feedback on how the student works, i.e. comment on his or her actions, abilities to handle situations or use of learning strategies.

Feedback is also a great way to guide motivation and attitudes, a student's thoughts on a subject or an assignment. You can use it to support a student's self-confidence and self-image. Feedback can strengthen a student's self-image and motivate him or her to work. You need to be careful, though, if you start evaluating a student's temperament or his individual tendencies. One point of feedback is to make the student understand himself as a learner, and to accept himself. Teachers should support the individual growth of each student. Feedback should never be used to kill the joy of learning.

Quite often, a student can feel hurt by feedback even when this happens face-to-face. We aren't always very good at either giving or receiving feedback. This is why one needs to pay extra attention when giving feedback in a web-based environment.

Feedback situations always give rise to feelings, both positive and negative.

Cockman, Evans and Reynolds have observed the dynamics of guiding in different client situations. They have described various situations between clients or students and thought about ways they could be made more consultative, client-based, and situation-specific. We can call these client-centered approaches 'consultative'. There are four different types of consultative approaches, depending on the situation or state of the student.

Often these are used one at a time, but some situations may require you to switch styles. Guiding is always situation-specific; it depends on the student's state at that given moment. One style cannot cover

all situations. However, there are many tools available to create an interactive situation whereby the goal you desire can be achieved.

In the following I will describe briefly what these consultative styles are; you can then think about how you might use them in a web-based guiding situation.

The first style is the so-called ‘acceptant’ style. You use it when the person you are guiding is very emotional: angry, disappointed, frustrated, depressed, or feeling like he or she has failed. When a learner is very emotional you cannot really guide him by saying that he should just get on with things. It is better to calm the person down by listening to and agreeing with them. You might ask the learner to go on talking and to be more specific. However, it is of no use to ask questions, because they may cause the situation to be even more emotional. This kind of guidance may seem impossible to do by messaging. It is always better to meet face-to-face, or through a video link, or talk on the phone. The emotions may calm down when the learner senses that someone is listening and cares, and the learner feels validated in talking about his or her feelings.

The second style is the so-called ‘catalytic’ style. This is when a teacher guides a student in a situation where he or she doesn't know how to continue with his or her work or studies. The teacher can ask ‘catalyzing questions’, i.e. questions that initiate. These questions might include ‘What is this about?’ ‘How have you coped so far?’ and ‘How do you think you might solve this issue?’

Questions starting with ‘what’ and ‘how’ help the student to look at his or her situation and think about what to do and how to proceed. A catalyzing question is a tool by which the teacher may initiate the thoughts of the student. Even one such question can initiate a process and activate thinking. This also leaves room for the student’s thinking. Therefore, it is good not to ask another question immediately, because many questions may cause confusion. It might be better to link questions, first asking something about the matter and then later something else. Just remember that each question will initiate thinking. You can also think about this by looking at the student’s situation. You might describe the student’s situation by thinking of him or her in a dark attic. Your questions will illuminate the space for the student, metaphorically using a flashlight to illuminate one thing at a time so that, bit by bit, the student will see the whole. This will make it possible for him or her to continue working. The student will also learn a way to work with problematic situations.

The third style is the so-called ‘confrontational’ style. The teacher notices a conflict between what the student is saying and what he or she is doing. It might be difficult to raise this issue. You can ask: “May I confront you?” If the student says “Yes”, it is because he or she realizes that the teacher will be raising a potentially difficult issue.



It is not a good idea to ask direct questions such as 'WHY is this...' or 'WHY are you late?' because they only put the student on the defensive. The 'why' question will make him or her feel guilty. This often creates an impasse, and the student may even become very emotional. You need to use the accepting style to calm the situation down before you can continue.

The digital world can work well for confrontation, such as a situation where we have mutually agreed with another person on something. However, there has been no follow-up on the agreement. When the communication is in electronic form, we can always return it to the person we are guiding in a "cut and paste" form and ask what is going on. However, to control the situation, only things we have perceived can be discussed, i.e. those we have seen, read, heard, or discussed in the situation of guiding. In contrast, assumptions, interpretations or expectations that cannot be verified cannot be discussed. As a guide, your discussion can only be based on real, authentic experiences.

The fourth and last consultation-based style of working is the so-called 'prescriptive' style. This style is very common among teachers, formerly almost the 'expected' style of experts. The 'expert' guides on how to proceed or how to do something; the 'expert' may even solve the problem himself. This is routine in many workplaces. When one asks for advice, the answer is: "I'll take care of this." However, this results in the 'asker' not being able to learn and develop his or her own skills and knowledge.

Sometimes, when one is in a hurry, it might be good to give advice or solve the problem oneself, especially if the situation at hand is critical and one needs to act quickly.

However, if you want students to learn to be more independent, and learn to solve situations for themselves, then in the long run this kind of style is not good. Learning self-guidance is a process that proceeds one step at a time.

Learn to use consultative styles when you are paying attention to the situation of the people you are guiding. What would work best both for the one you are guiding, and for you?

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