Discussion

Communication is extremely important in online education since students may never step foot on an institution’s campus or do so infrequently. For most online students, their primary contact with an institution is through their communication with faculty. In this capacity, faculty are truly institutional ambassadors; therefore, communication training is essential. Human communication, as outlined in this paper, is complex but plays a valuable, if not pivotal, role in student engagement, connectivity, and retention. In online environments, students may not have the advantage of the many visual and vocal cues inherent in face-to-face courses; however, through advancements in technology, faculty can reach out to students through learning system tools that support text, voice, and video communication.

It is clear that nonverbal communication in a face-to-face classroom, including visual cues and vocal cues, can affect how a message is conveyed by the sender/receiver and interpreted by the receiver/sender. Even when words are not being used, communication is still taking place in a face-to-face classroom. However, in an online classroom, there is a shift and increased emphasis on words, particularly with written communication. Lexicon, semantics, and syntax can greatly affect how a written message is conveyed and interpreted. Tubbs and Moss (2006) provide definitions for types of messages (verbal, intentional verbal, unintentional verbal, nonverbal, intentional verbal, and unintentional verbal). However, these definitions primarily apply to a face-to-face setting. Therefore, building upon these definitions and research by Tubbs and Moss (2006), this paper puts forth the following definitions for verbal/text and nonverbal/text messages for the online environment:

- **Verbal/text** - any type of written communication that uses one or more words;
- **Intentional verbal/text** - conscious attempts we make to communicate with others through writing (words, abbreviations, shorthand, chat slang);
- **Unintentional verbal/text** - the things we write without meaning to (typos, spelling errors);
- **Nonverbal/text** - all of the messages we transmit with text or over and above the text we use;
- **Intentional nonverbal/text messages** - the nonverbal/text messages we want to transmit (e.g., font style, font size, color, upper and lower case letters, punctuation, symbols, exclamations, emoticons, etc.); and
- **Unintentional nonverbal/text messages** - all those nonverbal/text aspects of our behavior transmitted without our control.

Both verbal/text and nonverbal/text can convey tone in the message to the receiver/sender. As indicated by Rudick and O’Flahavan (ND), “Tone comes from your choice of words, the structure of your sentences, and the order of the information you present” (¶2). Rudick and O’Flahavan (n.d.), provide an example of how word selection alone can convey different meanings to the receiver/sender. “Would you prefer to be described as slender, slim, svelte, skinny, scrawny, or starved?” (Rudick & O’Flahavan, nd, ¶1). Tone can also be conveyed by faculty in written feedback on graded student assignments. The combination of verbal/text and nonverbal/text may affect a student’s interpretation of the feedback. Read the sample feedback provided below and consider how the same message may be interpreted differently by a student based on the verbal/text and nonverbal/text.

- **DO NOT INCLUDE A COVER PAGE ON YOUR NEXT PAPER!!!**
- **DO NOT INCLUDE** a cover page on your **NEXT paper**!
- **Do not include** a cover page on your next paper 😒
- Do not include a cover page on your next paper 😊
- Do not include a cover page on your next paper.

While the words are the same in the feedback, it is the nonverbal/text that conveys differences in tone. Read the next set of sample feedback provided below and consider how the message may be interpreted by a student.

- Remember, do not include a cover page on your next paper.
- Remember, do not include a cover page on your next paper 😊

Although the message is essentially identical to the previous set of sample feedback, consider how the addition of the word “remember” as well as the decreased usage of intentional nonverbal/text change the tone of the message.

Recognizing that nonverbal/text can influence how feedback is interpreted/misinterpreted by students, administrators need to develop communication training for online faculty with strategies for integrating constructive written communication into instruction, feedback, and correspondence (e.g., email, discussion boards, wikis, feedback on assignments, etc.). Communication with faculty is often an online student’s primary
source of contact with an institution so it is essential that faculty are able to communicate effectively in an online environment.

**Recommendations**

Effective communication is important to online, blended, and face-to-face education. Therefore, administrators need to develop training and professional development that builds upon communication theory and provides faculty with skills and strategies for being effective online communicators. While the following recommendations are for online programs, the recommendations can also be used by blended programs as well as on-campus programs since faculty communicate regularly with students electronically. The recommendations include training, setting the tone, and diversifying communication strategies.

**Training**

Human communication and effective communication strategies need to be an integral part of faculty training and professional development. Program administrators need to provide online faculty with overall program expectations for communicating through instruction and communicating with online students. For example, faculty guidelines should denote how quickly faculty are expected to respond to student emails, the type(s) of feedback expected on graded assignments, the timeframe for posting grades, how often to post in discussion boards, how often to post announcements, etc. If expectations and guidelines are not provided, there will be inconsistency in overall communication from one course to another. Training should showcase the available types of course management system tools that support communication, instruction, and engagement as well as how to use the tools. Most importantly, training should be ongoing. While it is critical to provide training for newly hired online faculty, ongoing professional development provides faculty with opportunities to develop new skills, augment instructional methods, and utilize innovative tools for reaching out to and connecting with students through effective communication.

**Setting the Tone**

As previously stated, communication for online students is extremely important since a student’s primary contact with an institution is often through engagement with faculty. Therefore, administrators need to support the integration of effective communication across all courses. It is recommended that administrators encourage faculty, through professional development, to introspectively examine their own communication style relating to written and voice communication by reviewing previous feedback sent to students (e.g., feedback on assignments, emails, discussion boards, etc.) as well as watching/listening to archived live classrooms, voiceover PPTs, or pre-recorded video lectures. By doing so, faculty will be able to identify patterns that may positively or negatively affect the tone in their communication with students. For example, patterns may emerge when examining the use of lexicon, semantics, and syntax in written communication. Conversely, patterns may emerge when examining the use of visual and vocal cues in voice communication through pre-recorded synchronous or asynchronous classes or PowerPoint presentations. Throughout each quarter/semester, faculty send hundreds of messages through various communication channels. Therefore, faculty need to become aware of their own communication style relating to tone so they can build upon communication strengths and improve communication weaknesses through training and development.

**Diversifying Communication Strategies**

As indicated by Faharani (2003), interaction in a face-to-face program is predominately based on verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors, while interaction in an online program is predominantly based on written communication. Online faculty need training on how to incorporate diverse communication strategies into online courses to communicate more effectively with online students. Today’s course management system tools provide extensive channels for communicating with students, so it is recommended that online instruction integrate a mixture of communication strategies throughout a quarter/semester. Voice announcements are an excellent way to share enthusiasm about a submitted course assignment in which the students performed very well. Voice announcements can also be used to provide verbal reminders and tips relating to an upcoming assignment to augment the written requirements. Voice emails can be sent to an individual student to provide encouragement if the student has voiced concern or doubt about an assignment, a course, or enrollment. Voice emails can also be used to share group accolades about a project that was well presented. Online synchronous classroom environments (e.g., Horizon Wimba Classroom, Adobe Connect, GoToMeeting, etc.) provide opportunities for students to engage in a synchronous setting and enable faculty to use video or voice communication to connect with students. Asynchronous voice boards provide venues for class debates and role-plays. Written communication (e.g., email, text discussion boards, announcements, etc.) will always have a critical role in online communication.
education; however, hearing and seeing an online instructor is an excellent way to personalize the online educational experience.

Conclusion

Effective communication in online education begins with an understanding of human communication and the differences between teaching in a face-to-face and an online environment. Training is essential for newly hired faculty as well as seasoned online instructors so communication is not “lost in translation.” Faculty guidelines are needed to provide expectations relating to communication. Recognizing that online education can be very text-driven, it is important that faculty integrate diverse communication strategies into online courses to engage and connect students as active participants. While communication training is essential to developing effective communication skills, faculty must introspectively examine their own style of communication which will greatly assist in professional development and growth as an online instructor.

As technology advances, it is important that research continues in the area of human communication and online education. While this paper has provided an overview of human communication, many facets of communication were not covered due to the vastness of literature in the field of communication (e.g., gender, interpersonal, intercultural, group communication, organizational communication, etc.). Comparative research and studies with online, blended, and face-to-face programs are needed to better understand human communication across these types of educational settings. Research should also examine so-called channel effects, in which the channel used to communicate may carry with it certain strengths, weaknesses, biases, and expectations. Additionally, further research should examine these affects on the effectiveness and efficacy of different learning modalities. While advancements in technology and telecommunications are transforming communication and educational delivery, the key to engaging, connecting, and retaining students in online education will be human communication, online human touch, and administrative support.

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[http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer122/betts122.html](http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer122/betts122.html)


