

Online “Etiquette”

by Emily O. Gravett

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Welcome to a new year and a new semester. Before I get into today’s Toolbox topic, I wanted to say a few words about what’s been happening in our nation recently. The attack on Congress last week, which left five dead, more injured, and the nation shaken, adds yet another crisis for us to navigate—in the middle of what is shaping up to be the most dangerous phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like last year, we will again be faced with supporting traumatized students, negotiating difficult conversations, and exercising the self-care that allows us to make it through this mess. The CFI has a number of resources to help: Take a look at our Teaching Toolboxes on [difficult conversations surrounding the 2020 election](#), [talking about race with students](#), [trauma-informed teaching](#), [practicing self-care](#), and considering [the role of love](#) in catastrophic times (and [there is more](#)). And, on Tuesday, January 19, from 9:30 to 11AM, we will be offering [an open conversation for faculty and staff on the current situation](#) and what it means to us as professionals and academics. Please join us.

Over Winter Break, a colleague reached out to ask me if the CFI had any boilerplate language for “online etiquette” because she is going to be teaching through Zoom for the first time this semester. We’re all going to be online for a bit, at least. There are, perhaps, some common “netiquette” tips that we all can share with students (and practice ourselves), such as those summarized by [Libraries](#): ensure there isn’t glare or bad lighting, check the audio/video ahead of time, arrive early, mute the mic when not talking, don’t post inappropriate audio or images, etc. But beyond these, as you may know, I’m not much for one-size-fits-all solutions; our contexts are all so different, especially now. Below are just three examples of areas related to online etiquette that you may find yourself considering (and some questions and decisions you might make accordingly):

Required video: Some faculty have concluded it’s too invasive or risky to require students to turn their video cameras on (e.g., what if students are in environments that they prefer not to disclose, for reasons of safety, shame, and more?). Some faculty think of it as an equity issue; not all students will have the necessary technology or bandwidth, for instance. Some faculty are worried about the possibly deleterious effects on student learning if videos are allowed to be off (e.g., will students really be paying attention?). Some faculty, like those teaching vocal lessons, may not feel like they have much of a choice. In the latter case, you can simply let students know, upfront, that turning on the video is a requirement for achieving the learning outcomes of the course, and then students can decide for themselves if this is something they feel comfortable doing...and thus whether they want to stay enrolled in your course. If, in your course, videos aren’t essential, but rather preferable, you can still encourage students to turn them on; I plan to include something in my syllabus like, “I love teaching in-person because I get to see you all. I miss this element when we are online. I encourage you, if you are able and comfortable, to turn your video on during our class, so that I can see you. It’s hard teaching to a bunch of blank boxes. This will make our time together more personal and interactive.”

Use of chat box: Last spring, some faculty experienced increased student engagement in the chat box, especially from those students who had not talked much in class (perhaps due to anxiety, introversion, or the like). I myself used the chat box in the fall as a way to [check-in](#) with students or as a white board, where I spelled out key concepts, wrote questions out after I said them verbally, and more. Other faculty use the chat box for polling; this works even in larger classes. Some are finding it difficult to pay attention to the chat box and do anything else (like lecture) at the same time. (This is why, in most of

our online CFI programs now, we have two facilitators; it's very helpful to have one person devoted to managing the chat, while the other talks.) Some faculty have had students post inappropriate things in the chat box (of course, inappropriate comments can happen in-person too). The chat box can be totally turned off, if you want. Because my courses are primarily discussion-based, and because I want students to be able to "discuss" in various ways, I choose to keep the chat box open. You may have different needs, outcomes, priorities, preferences.

Professional standards: I'm working at home. Still. Many of us are. There are lots of cats and kids. Interruptions are frequent. WiFi gets dropped. Equipment doesn't work properly. Things don't go according to plan. Standards of professionalism have been [critiqued for their bias](#), even under normal circumstances (what kind of hair, dress, smells, etc. are deemed "appropriate"—and why?), but the pandemic has only exacerbated inequities. Students were "attending" my fall course from the Student Success Center, from the Virgin Islands, from their childhood bedrooms in Northern Virginia, from their rented apartments in Harrisonburg. Our norms have changed. I'm wearing sweatpants most of the time when I'm teaching; just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not happening! If some kind of professional dress code or background, for instance, is important for students to learn in your context, consider how to clearly convey that importance and how to set those expectations, which would then have to somehow be enforceable in an online environment. If it's not an important outcome, then you don't need to worry as much about this element of etiquette. We could all use a little slack, a little grace, at this time.

Many "online etiquette" considerations, of course, remain the same online as in person. Do you care if students show up on time? Do you care if they come to class at all? Why or why not? Do you care if everyone talks each class period? Do you care about the language students use to express themselves? What counts as "participation"? These questions and more will be up to you (possibly along with your students—see below) to decide.

At the beginning of each semester, including now that I'm teaching online, I always create ground rules (about etiquette, though I don't call it this) together with my students. We devote at least part of the second day of class to doing so (sometimes this takes a full class period and often I follow up the next class too). I put students in groups (breakout rooms now in Zoom) of about 3-5 and ask them to brainstorm their responses to the following, which then form the standards for their "attendance and engagement" grade (10% of the final course grade): *What would it look like if we were to bring our "best selves" to class every day? What standards do we want to uphold?* I've had them type directly into a shared Google Doc (no log-in required) or simply tell the group their responses verbally while I type in a document that I have screen-shared. Some of their online norms are the same as they would have been in-person (e.g., stay awake, don't talk while others are talking); others are specific to the online environment (e.g., stay muted while others are talking). We discuss, debate, clarify, and then agree to hold ourselves and each other to these standards. I do, as well; after all, I'm a part of the community too. I revisit these norms regularly (e.g., by posting them on the screen at the beginning of class, by asking students to re-read them to discern if we need to make any changes, by including questions about the norms on quizzes/tests, by checking in with students about how we are doing with them, by posting a link to them in our Canvas site). These norms are living and they guide our time together. This exercise itself fosters a sense of community, where students feel like they have buy-in (vs. more contractual or top-down approaches wherein the instructor makes all the rules). Students regularly note the community feel, and this activity particularly, on my course evaluations. If it would work in your particular instructional context, I highly recommend it.

As you think about “etiquette” (norms, ground rules—whatever you want to call them) for your own upcoming classes, you might ask yourself:

- What else might be needed for your context?
- What justifies including these elements of etiquette?
- How are they related (or not) to what students will be learning?
- How could students be involved in their creation?

Good luck!

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For more information about the CFI’s Teaching Toolboxes, please visit:

<https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>
