

## **Instructor Tone in Written Communication: Are We Saying What We Want Them to Hear?**

Carol Rubel, [crubel@kaplan.edu](mailto:crubel@kaplan.edu)  
Marie Wallace, <mailto:mwallace@kaplan.edu>

Kaplan University  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL, USA

**Abstract:** The importance of establishing an inviting atmosphere through written communication is essential in online instruction. Since written communication is the primary format for teacher/ student interaction, instructors must be knowledgeable about their word choice in feedback and the effect on students. Online instructors' tone in written communication in feedback may influence students' perceptions of: (a) encouragement; (b) community; and (c) continued participation in the course/program. These factors may be managed through faculty knowledge and awareness of the impact on how word choice in written communication may be perceived by students.

### **Introduction**

The importance of establishing an inviting atmosphere through written communication is essential in online instruction. Since written communication is the primary format for teacher/student interaction, instructors must be knowledgeable about their word choice in feedback and its effect on students. Instructors new to online communication need strategies to promote an inviting atmosphere that contains encouragement, empathy, and community.

Historically, online universities recruit instructors from traditional settings. These instructors are more familiar with face to face instruction, and do not rely as heavily on written communication as does the virtual instructor. In the classroom, these instructors can offer students non-verbal feedback, which can influence the students' reception of information. However, in today's highly competitive higher education market, many institutions of higher learning are expanding their course offerings to include online programs, as well as blended programs, which provide instruction in both formats. Traditional and online higher education institutions will need not only to attract students, but to also learn how to maintain student retention in their programs. All programs are impacted by various unique issues; however, online programs are designed to assure student success mostly through instructor feedback in the form of written communication.

Ongoing training and orientation for these new online instructors is generally offered in terms of using the learning management system and specifics to the online program demands for timely feedback.

Many virtual educational institutions present orientation and training that does not include the importance of word choice in student feedback. It is important to provide new online instructors with word choice strategies that will promote student success in the online environment (Russo & Campbell, 2004). The focus of this paper is on how the online instructor can influence student success through knowledge and use of word choice in written feedback in the online learning environment.

Online instructors are seeking ways to improve their communication and enhance the learning experience of their students. Instructors within a virtual setting must communicate effectively without the non-verbal cues that are most often evident in the traditional classroom. Students must understand the intent of the communication. Word choice reflects tone in written communication. Students interpret written communication and the intent of the instructors' words in the context of their personal experiences and the current stress in their lives.

Teaching a course where there is no face-to-face contact with the learner eliminates the unspoken language of nonverbal clues that teachers use to get a feel for their classrooms. The instructor of a virtual class must be cognizant of the interactions with each learner and the wording of each message sent to those learners. Because the students are not sitting in the classroom, a simple joke that is shared may be interpreted in a completely different and unintended way by a learner working from home many states or even continents away. Instructors cannot see a raised hand asking a question that provides clarification of a topic (Brown & Corkill, 2004).

For this discussion, tone in writing refers to "the writer's attitude toward the reader and the subject of the message. The overall tone of a written message affects the reader just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges" (Ober, 1995, p. 85). Online instructors' tone in written communication may influence students' perceptions of: (a) encouragement; (b) community; and (c) continued participation in the course/program. These factors may be managed through faculty knowledge and awareness of the impact of how word choice in written communication may be perceived by students. The study on which this presentation is based explored the following research questions:

1. How does an instructor's tone in written feedback influence a student's perception of the learning community?
2. What are some specialized words used by instructors to offer positive constructive feedback while maintaining a positive student perception of themselves and their work?
3. What specific vocabulary can be used by instructors during written communication to promote student satisfaction and retention within the university program?

## **Literature Review**

As online programs grow, instructors search for ways to improve the education of their students and enhance the educational environment. The focus of much research has been on the student and the attributes related to success. "Research examining student success

in online education has focused extensively on internal learner attributes with little emphasis on external, controllable factors that may mediate a student's ability to perform within the distinctive environment of the virtual classroom" (Mandernach, Donnelly, & Dailey-Hebert, 2006, para.1), These internal attributes describe personality characteristics, learning styles, etc. However, learning is dependent upon open communication between student and instructor. According to Woods (2004), "researchers and scholars stress the importance of a 'high degree' of interaction for instructors who desire to build strong relationships and foster a sense of community among learners" (p. 3). However, the tone of the feedback and the student's perception of the feedback is an area of study that needs more exploration. Siragusa, Dixon & Dixon (2006) found that "students' personal perceptions of communication apprehension and competence were highly influential on their overall expectations of educational success in the unit studied" (p. 1). Therefore, universities might consider including training for their online instructors in written communication.

Since word choice reflects tone, intended or unintended, the instructors need to be mindful of the power of their chosen words. Online instructors who are transitioning from the traditional face to face environment need specific training aimed at making them aware of the importance of this online communication. Even good intentions from skilled instructors can be misunderstood. According to Halio (2004):

In the classroom, when we react to students' concerns, we can use body language, facial expressions, gestures, and words to communicate, but online we have only the written word (unless we are using video conferencing). The written word leaves a trail and can be misinterpreted. (para.4)

Instructors need to be aware of how their words communicate compassion and how the tone of the communication is perceived by the student. Added to this communication problem is the part that stress plays in the equation. The current economic climate and the resulting stress have added another dimension to the problems with communication. All students need a learning environment that is compassionate and encouraging. Personal issues can prevent a student from completing assignments and ultimately completing the course. Instructors must find ways to improve their communication and to do this they need to be aware of the connection of words to tone.

Savery (2005) has an approach that addresses the components that are necessary for effective communication and ultimately for the success of online learning. Successful instructors have certain characteristics and practices that insure effective communication.

The VOCAL approach summarizes the key characteristics that a master instructor utilizes to be effective in an online environment. VOCAL is an acronym for Visible, Organized, Compassionate, Analytical and Leader-by example. The ability of the teacher to effectively infuse these characteristics into their instructional practice – to BE VOCAL - will promote a supportive, challenging, constructive, rigorous and effective instructional environment. Instructors who practice a VOCAL approach

will have more productive learning environments, fewer management problems and more positive learning experiences with their students. (Savery, p. 141)

This approach can be used to train new online instructors on the connection between words and the creation of community in the online learning environment.

Compassion, concern, and encouragement can be communicated in the online environment. Effective communication strategies from the traditional environment can influence the online instructor's use of words that reflect a positive tone. Using Purkey's & Novak's (1996) work in the area of developing traditional school programs that lead to school success, similar categories can be used to guide online written positive and effective communication.

Stanley, Junke, and Purkey (2004) went on to advance the concept of the Invitational Theory of Practice (ITOP). According to their study, ITOP can encourage positive student perception. However, the communication needs to do the following:

- Communicate caring
- Provide appropriate information
- Summon the realization of human potential
- Identify and defeat forces that destroy potential. (Stanley et al., p. 304)

The four basic premises of ITOP present direct communication in a format that provides the best possible means of creating a positive, welcoming learning environment. The principles include:

**Respect:** Everyone is able, valuable, and responsible, and is to be treated accordingly

**Trust:** When students trust teachers, they are more likely to work together.

**Optimism:** Optimism is essential for a good and successful life.

**Intentionality:** ...a successful school environment is best realized by creating and maintaining welcoming places, policies, processes, and programs, and by caring people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally. (Stanley et al., p. 304)

Clearly the challenges facing online instructors for which they need to use written communication have been recognized. Mandernach, Donnelly, & Dailey-Hebert (2006) noted that time, technology, competence, and personal issues impact the ability of the instructor to promote student success. In agreement are Polloff & Pratt (2001) who emphasize the need for instructors to understand how their practical advice and feedback impact student learning.

In the online venue, the use of written communication becomes the key to student, and instructor success. Early research in online learning focused more on the attributes of the

successful student. More recent research has explored other factors for predicting success related to instructor skills, strategies, and communication. The current economic climate has increased the stress level of online learners. According to Kramarae (2001) “Female students may have extraordinary family responsibilities and financial pressures that can overwhelm them during the semester” (para. 4). With the increase in stress level, students’ perceptions of communicated information may be skewed. Therefore, instructors need to be knowledgeable about the impact of their words.

### **Methodology**

This three week qualitative descriptive study assessed the impact of instructor word choice in written communication on students’ perceptions of teacher support and feedback. Instructor tone was assessed through categories of inviting and disinviting words (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Researchers developed a seven question survey for faculty (Appendix A). The faculty participants were sent an invitational participatory letter with a link to a survey containing seven questions related to economic climate, stress, course participation and instructors’ written communication word choice. It was anticipated that the instructors’ survey revealed individual instructor’s word choices in response to the students’ written communication. The areas of communication included, but were not limited to, discussion boards, seminars, class assignments, and emails.

The participants of this study were instructors of graduate education for an online university. Participation in this study was voluntary. The participants closely reflected the total graduate education instructor population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and other related characteristics. Of the 50 instructors sampled, there was a 15% response rate.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

During the middle of the summer 2009 semester, the invitational participatory letter including the link to the survey was emailed to the study subjects of a graduate education program for an online university. Participants had only to click the link within the email to attain the survey, reducing the need for respondents’ written agreement. Through the use of an existing group of instructors, the researchers helped focus on current written communication. This provided prevailing realistic language used within the textual applications.

The instructor survey allowed for collection of individual word choices in response to students’ self-acclaimed personal stress that was impeding their abilities to complete work in a timely fashion or to complete the coursework. Instructors were also asked to categorize their responses according to constructive feedback on discussion boards, seminars, and emails. Self-awareness was a secondary goal for the instructors to consider how their written communication may be perceived differently from their intent. The survey supplied a self-assessing aspect of consideration as instructors noted their personal word choice and how their written language may be perceived by students. Instructors’ comments fell into areas such as encouraging, neutral, or discouraging.

The surveys contained different types of questions (rating scale, multiple-choice and open ended). The rating scale questions had four possible choices (not at all, somewhat, very much and not applicable). The open ended responses that required short narratives were analyzed and categorized as encouraging or discouraging. The instructor responses were analyzed and categorized as: general comments or encouragement, compliments and suggestions.

Finally, the data were collected and organized into two lists of words – inviting/disinviting. The analysis of words as inviting and disinviting has been established in *Inviting School Success* (Purkey & Novak, 1996). The data results were used to develop a list of words that instructors can use to respond to students with an inviting tone.

Strategies for instructor orientation were developed based on the survey results. The data from this study provided possible written communication strategies for online instructors to use when offering feedback in emails, seminars, discussion boards, and written assignments. Strategies of providing encouragement, empathy, and positive constructive feedback can be found in the appendices (See Appendices B, C, D, E).

## **Results**

Based on instructor responses to the survey, the specific words to motivate students fell into three categories: encouragement, compliments, and suggestions. A total of 44 comment suggestions were offered and these were categorized as: 21 encouragement; 18 compliments; and 5 suggestions (See Appendix B). A majority of the instructors (79%) believed that word choice is important in communicating their willingness to help. A sizable majority (93 %) indicated that their word choice influenced how students perceived their accessibility. Finally, 86% of instructors recognized that word choice promotes the collaborative relationship between instructors and students. Survey responses to specific words used to encourage or discourage student participation fell into three categories: encouragement, compliments and suggestions. The instructors did not identify any “discouraging words.” (See Appendix C). Seventy-two percent of the instructors offered specific reflections on word choice in their written communication that they felt may impact student participation (See Appendix D).

The final instructor survey question asked teachers to reflect on the relationship between tone in written communication and the students’ perception within the online learning environment. All (100%) of the instructors believed there was a direct relationship between word choice and promotion of an accepting/encouraging online learning environment. Instructor comments indicated, “In an online environment, where we only have the written word for communication, word choice has a direct relationship to tone and classroom climate. Many more words with positive meanings and connotations must be used to convey warmth, encouragement, and belief in students' ability.”

Complementing this statement, another instructor noted, “We don't have physical gestures or facial expressions to accompany our words, so they must do multiple duty. [And] Since students will be more prone to pick up on negative connotations and suggestions, we must select our words carefully, sandwiching any criticism with positive, encouraging comments.”

Speaking specifically of incorporating tone and word choice to create an inviting atmosphere, one instructor noted, “I believe that word choice and tone will set the classroom climate.” Another commented, “I think it makes all the difference in the world. If a student does not feel respected and valued, then they are not going to want to participate in any kind of discussion or dialogue.” Finally, one instructor sums up the impact of influence of tone and word choice on students’ online engagement: “As an instructor your word choice will set the tone for the students to either give it their all or give it their minimum. Classroom climate is set during the first communication from the instructor. Because they cannot see your face, word choice is more important than ever. I must say though that word choice is also important for those students who have set patterns in classes of being unmotivated. Using that parent tone of structured, yet caring is very important. It's a balancing act.”

## **Discussion**

Online learning has been focused on student factors and characteristics of students who are successful in online learning. This study focused on teacher factors that can impact successful online learning. In particular, the written communication and tone conveyed through that communication was the focus of the survey.

Many of the participants indicated that students reported their academic and personal concerns via email; however, some instructors revealed that they received student information via advisors' emails. One explanation might be that the students are either reporting to the advisor or not reporting at all. The decision to inform an instructor may be related to factors out of the instructor’s control. Further research on instructor outreach is needed. Do the instructors who send emails to students offering help get a response?

The researchers looked at the specific words that instructors used to provide feedback and categorized these words and comments into general comments of encouragement, compliments and suggestions. Instructors reported a large number of comments that were in the category of general (21) and complimentary (18) but fewer in the area of suggestions. Only five compliments could be classified as suggestions. In light of the student survey that indicated a need for more explanation in regard to grading, instructions need to be more forthcoming with suggestions for improvement. The use of the sandwich approach in the comment section of the grade book encourages and motivates. First make a positive opening statement. Follow with constructive feedback.

and specific suggestions for improvement. Conclude your comment with an encouraging and positive statement.

Although the instructors indicated an understanding of the importance of word choice, some may not be aware of how words change depending on the delivery system. Words that may be encouraging in a face to face contact can be perceived differently in an email. For instructors who are most familiar with the face to face environment, this information is crucial. Words that they may use in a traditional classroom to encourage may have the opposite effect in an online environment. Therefore, all instructors may want to focus on the pre-writing thoughts:

- Audience: To whom am I writing this?
- Product: What am I writing?
- Purpose: Why am I writing this?
- Consequence: How do I want the person to react?
- Choice: What kind of tone should I use?

The findings of this research study have important implications for online instructional written feedback. Novice online instructors should consider using language in the “inviting” category on the *Say This - Not That* list. (See Appendix E). These phrases, taken from instructors' survey comments are either inviting or disinviting.

Online instructors should exercise caution when interpreting student outreach or feedback concerning personal stress indicators. Since the goal of the university is for the student to successfully complete the course, the instructor's acceptance of human reality and frailty is important. Instructors need to be aware of tone when making decisions in regard to student's unique situations.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The growth of online higher education presents challenges for instructors and students. Communication is the key to successful learning in traditional and online settings. Email and discussion board postings are the primary communication vehicles for reporting problems. The instructor tone in written responses is important in creating an inviting environment.

Students are first introduced to online learning through their advisers during the enrollment process, and therefore, often report issues directly to their advisor. However, instructors also need to know when students are experiencing issues that interfere with learning. Whenever possible, the instructor needs to be alerted to problems so that they can provide support.

When offering feedback, instructors appear to be comfortable with communicating encouragement and compliments; however, only a small number of instructors provided suggestions. It is important to establish a positive tone when extending ideas for

suggestions. The suggestions should focus on specifics and details that will help the student complete work and improve their skills in the course.

Although the instructors understand the importance of word choice in promoting a collaborative relationship with the students, the teachers' reference for communicating in a traditional setting may not transfer in the same manner in the online environment. Some words that may appear benign in the normal course of speech, may offend certain students when communicated through written feedback. Reflective practice may assist instructors in evaluating their use of language and the communication of tone.

## References

- Brown, W. & Corkill, P. M. (2004). The practice of virtual teaching; School leaders who want to teach an online college course need to be mindful of effective tricks. *School Administrator*, 61, 26+. Retrieved July 7, 2009, from Questia database: <http://www.question.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5002107921>
- Halio, M. P. (2004). Teaching in our pajamas: Negotiating with adult learners in online distance writing courses. *College Teaching*, 52(2), 58+. Retrieved June 22, 2009, from Questia database: <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5006255626>
- Kramarae, C. (2001). *The third shift: Women learning online*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women Education Foundation.
- Mandernach, B., Donnelly, E., & Dailey-Hebert, A. (2006). Learner attribute research juxtaposed with online instructor experience: predictors of success in accelerated, online classroom. *The Journal of Educators Online*, 3(2). Retrieved June 23, 2009, from [www.thejeo.com/Volume3Number2/MandernackFinal.pdf](http://www.thejeo.com/Volume3Number2/MandernackFinal.pdf)
- Ober, S. (1995). *Contemporary business communication* (2nd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Polloff, R. M. & Pratt, K. (2001). *Lessons from the cyberspace classroom. The realities of online teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Purkey W. & Novak, J. (1996). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching, and learning, and democratic practice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Russo, T. C. & Campbell, S. W. (2004). Perceptions of mediated presence in an asynchronous online course: Interplay of communication behaviors and medium. *Distance Education*, 25(2), 215-232.
- Savery, J. (2005). Be vocal: Characteristics of successful online instructors. *Journal of Interactive Online learning*, 4 (2), 141-152.

- Seligman, M. E. (1990). *Learned optimism*. New York: Knopf.
- Siragusa, L., Dixon, K., & Dixon, R. (2006). Learner attributes in online environments: The impact of the individual on the outcome. Retrieved June 22, 2009, from <http://www.thejeo.com/Volume3Number2/MandernachFinal.pdf>
- Stanley, P. H., Juhnke, G. A., & Purkey, W. W. (2004). Using an Invitational Theory of Practice to Create Safe and Successful Schools. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 82(3), 302+. Retrieved June 22, 2009, from Questia database: <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5006659872>
- Woods, R. H. (2002). How much communication is enough in online courses?-Exploring the relationship between frequency of instructor-initiated personal email and learners' perceptions of and participation in online learning. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 29(4), 377+. Retrieved June 22, 2009, from Questia database: <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000605343>

**Appendix A: Instructor Questionnaire**

1. How did you become aware of students who were experiencing stress this term?
  - a. email
  - b. phone
  - c. not applicable
  
2. Of these students, how many reported that their stress was related to difficult economic climate?
  - a. none
  - b. 1-5
  - c. 5-10
  - d. 11 +
  
3. What specific words did you use for constructive feedback? Look at the categories below and provide specific language used in each category.
  - a. Complete assignments
  - b. Participate in discussion boards
  - c. Participate in seminar
  - d. Respond to instructor emails
  
4. In what ways do you think your word choice affects the student's
  - a. perception of your willingness to help them,
  - b. your accessibility
  - c. your understanding of their current situation
  - d. the promotion of a collaborative relationship
  - e. other
  
5. What specific words did you use that may have encouraged or discouraged student participation in the course?
  
6. How do you feel that your specific word choice in your written communication with students impacted their decision to participate in all areas of the class?
  
7. Explain your understanding of the connection among specific word choice, tone and classroom climate.

## Appendix B: Instructor Comments

### General comments of encouragements:

- a. I've noticed that I haven't received your assignment
- b. Please contact me if you need help
- c. just a reminder
- d. Please let me know how I can help you
- e. Please plan to join us to share your knowledge
- f. Missed you in the seminar
- g. I appreciate your taking time to be here
- h. When you get a chance, will you let me know how you're doing
- i. Just checking to make sure you rec'd my email
- j. Let's talk about getting you back on track...
- k. Thanks for the heads up on your situation
- l. Thanks for the response
- m. Let me know how I can help you succeed in this class
- n. I would like to thank you for your response
- o. Reach out to me if you need assistance
- p. Let me know how you are feeling
- q. Keep in touch

### Complimentary comments:

- a. Well written
- b. Excellent/strong/notable/interesting/ good discussion point
- c. Great job
- d. I appreciated the following details....
- e. I like how you...
- f. Sharing your expertise would be valuable for the class and me. Thanks for your thoughts and comments
- g. I appreciate your sharing
- h. Thoughtful response

### Suggestions:

- a. Pace yourself
- b. Do a little bit each night
- c. Keep a calendar
- d. Here is what I recommend you do...
- e. Dedicate certain evenings each week to complete

## **Appendix C: Instructor Comments on Encouragement and Compliments**

### **Words of general encouragement:**

- a. I do understand that "life" happens to all of us.
- b. I am here to assist you with any challenges you may come across
- c. I am here to help you succeed in our course...
- d. I am here for you, I believe in you, you can do this,
- e. This is a gentle reminder that there will be seminar, or we missed you at this week's Discussion Board.

### **Complimentary words suggested:**

- a. appreciate
- b. thoughtful
- c. good idea
- d. nicely put
- e. strong and clear statement
- f. sharing your expertise
- g. your participation contributes to everyone's learning
- h. your participation moves learning to a higher level
- i. thank you for your input on...
- j. your insights on this topic are valuable to our discussion
- k. you did a great job on your assignment
- l. good understanding
- m. well written
- n. insightful
- o. encourage

**Appendix D: Instructor Comments Impacting Student Participation**

- a. You do not have a second chance to make a good impression.
- b. Words must be selected carefully.
- c. Responses in the discussion board can either shut down discussion or facilitate it based on what language used.
- d. first providing a statement of encouragement or support
- e. Start with a positive statement about the strengths of a student's post.
- f. Word choice and positive tone make all the difference.
- g. Always thank them for taking the time to make contact.
- h. Word choice often reflects tone and openness, especially when the course is completely online and facial expressions and voice are not present.
- i. Place the students in high regard and encourage a thought provoking discussion
- j. If an instructor's heart is truly in what he or she is saying, it will come through, and the student will respond.

## Appendix E: Say This Not That

### Inviting Comments

- Let's talk it over
- How can I help you?
- We missed you in discussion, seminar, etc.
- I'm glad to hear from you
- I like that idea
- Welcome back
- I've been thinking of you
- How are things going?
- Of course I have the time
- I would like to help you
- Let's talk so that I can help you
- Thanks for writing/calling/sharing

### Disinviting Comments

- Did you read the directions?
- You are way behind
- I thought you had withdrawn
- Why are you calling when you could write?
- What are you proposing to do?
- I think you have missed too much of the class.
- Who are you and what class?
- You are way behind
- You need to call your advisor and drop the course
- I have talked to you about this before
- I am not sure what I can do to help you