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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Communicating with Students Online

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If communication were easy, all marriages would be made in heaven, differing perspectives would be valued, all students would be well rested and at ease, and we would get the sauce we asked for with our McNuggets. So much for the Better Universe. Here in this one, we instructors spend a lot of time trying to get across ideas that are perfectly clear in our heads to generally smart and willing learners. Often, it can feel like threading a needle with a climbing rope in a hailstorm. Sometimes, it is harder than that.

Why Am I Communicating?

Merlin Mann once said, "Never hit 'Send' on an email unless you know what you want to happen as a result." Whenever *communicating* with students, it's worth asking, "Why am I doing this? What do I want to happen as a result?" ("Ah!" you say, being an academic and therefore the kind of person who can't wait to say this sort of thing, "Locution, illocution, and perlocution." That's fine.)

Often, we are simply *conveying information*. What is the schedule, the readings, the assignments, the rubrics; where is the feedback; when is the review, the exam, the due date for the paper; how does one reach the instructor, how does one cite sources. Learners need the info.

Hopefully, another purpose is *motivating* learners. Think of geese honking one another along in their V-formation on a chilly morning. "Hey, everyone got their reflection papers in on

deadline: great professionalism, can't wait to read them. On to the next unit!" "Last push before final papers are due: get your sleep, eat well, try to remember why you cared about your paper topic in the first place, and let's run through the finish line!"

Sometimes, we mean to *model* a behavior or an activity for learners. If my learners are engaged in a collaborative activity in an unfamiliar mode--a Twitter game, a group poem in a Google doc, a discussion-forum weeklong debate--then I may want to find a way to join as a participant, "showing the way" for learners who might hesitate to get themselves out onto the dance floor.

An aspect of communication that happens to be much on my mind these days is *disciplinary formation*. In my case, the ongoing effort to help learners wrap their heads around what I mean by "biblical studies," its materials, and particularly its methods and principles. Biblical studies is not Bible Study. Biblical studies relies on publicly available evidence and explicit lines of reasoning, and does not grant methodological place to private revelation or sectarian doctrine. The subject matter of biblical studies is texts, not God. You don't get all of this over in a syllabus, or an introductory lecture. It's an ongoing communicative process. "What are we doing here, and how do we do it, and why this way and not another?"

Any number of reasons to communicate could be added. Some of these are course correction ("Whoa y'all, remember that your responses to classmates have to substantively engage their own content, not just springboard off on your own thing"); self correction ("Sorry gang, I wrote two different due dates in the course documents; let's go with the later one, found in such-and-so doc on our Moodle site"); gathering information instead of disseminating it (a survey, a diagnostic quiz). There is no shortage of good reasons to communicate with learners, and it will do everyone good if I know what the purpose of each one is.

How Should I Communicate This?

A big part of the answer to this question derives from a prior question: "Who Should Hear This?" Deciding among your available channels (syllabus, email, blog post, Zoom meeting, dedicated course Twitter hash tag, YouTube video lecture, MP3 audio lecture, mumbling passive-aggressively in the hallways) mainly involves deciding on your audience. Sure, you know who you're talking to, but also, who do you want to be sure overhears it, and why? ("Ah!" you say, "Locution, illo..." except now nobody is listening.)

Private communication is the norm for feedback ("You got a B-plus, and here's why"). But, what about that wonderful form of feedback, "Catching the learner doing something right"? Alexis showed exemplary leadership moderating her small group this week. I can tell her so via email, and she may find that motivating, but what I *really* need is for her small-group colleagues Brad, Charlise, and Darius to overhear this since they will be moderating in future weeks. So, I will praise Alexis in whichever venue this work is happening (discussion forum, Google Doc, Twitter thread). Heads up, Brad and company!

As for that disciplinary formation I'm working on. I know from experience how much back-and-forth this can involve. My explanations are prone to misunderstanding; learners have substantive pre-formation to unpack and unlearn; I'm still discovering what kinds of questions my efforts will elicit. If anything calls for synchronic discourse (Zoom meeting, Chat session, webinar), this does. Still, no reason not to supplement with asynchronous tools: an Ask-Me-Anything (About Biblical Studies) discussion forum, for example, or a Glossary built by learners over the course of the semester (on the Learning Management System? as a Google Doc with a shareable link?). Also, disciplinary formation lends itself to a bit of "public theology" if possible. My learners aren't the only ones confused about what goes on in my field, and it's not like "Bible" doesn't have a prominent place in public discourse and policy. How about a webinar or social-media event open to the public? ("Students, prepare your pseudonyms, we have incoming!")

What is a syllabus for? Twenty years of teaching and I still can't quite say. I tend to tick-tock over time between the 3-page bare-bones syllabus (with other course docs picking up the slack: schedule, rubrics, policies, weekly instructions) and the 39-page behemoth that serves as The Complete and Final Revelation of Your Instructor to Her Flock (it never is). If I am going with multiple course docs all living in an LMS, then learners will need these to refer to one another: the course docs cross-reference each other, and the syllabus cross-references everything. It's not a scavenger hunt. (But you could include a real Scavenger Hunt through the course docs as a first-week activity!)

Of course, you can't use a tool you've never heard of (and I warn against using one in the field you've not tried first privately). Twitter, Google Docs, Slack, Discord, Zoom, YouTube, WordPress . . . pick one when you're in the mood and get some friends to take it out with you for a spin: gossip, play a game, exchange recipes. If nothing else, you'll have something to say at parties besides "Ah! Locution"

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