

# Online etiquette in virtual learning environment: reflection



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**Netiquette and Student Learning Experience on Blackboard – Reflective essay**

Communicating by email and other methods on the Internet such as online message boards and chat systems has become very common these days. It is almost impossible to pursue a course of study in higher or further education without using computers, and without communicating with other people online. Yet it can be safely said the most of us have never had any type of formal training in communicating online.

The increased use of Virtual Learning Environments such as Blackboard and Moodle put an additional imperative on students to learn how to communicate online. This means that students now not only need to learn the content of the course, they also need to use a new tool properly prior to studying the subject matter. At our University, the Blackboard is used for various courses. Most students today are already familiar with the Internet and have already communicated with others via various methods on the Internet; hence there isn't a steep learning curve when they learn to use this new tool. Additionally, support is provided in various ways for students who require it. Firstly, students can approach the online learning support officer if they require any general help with the system. Secondly, they can approach the module leader or teacher if they have any problems with any specific course they are taking on Blackboard. Thirdly, they can approach their personal tutor with any problems that cannot be otherwise resolved.

Practically, however, students often find peer support invaluable. I always found myself asking or being asked about specific issues with Blackboard. Some of the common questions are about where are the buttons one would require to perform certain tasks, for example the upload button when

submitting an assignment, what happens when the system ‘hangs’ – this often creates a lot of anxiety, especially when it happens close to the deadline for the submission of an assignment! I have often found that the people who are able to readily answer these questions have often faced the same problem themselves, and found it out either by trial and error on their own, or were in turn helped by some others. Although technology is often (dis)credited as the cause of an increasing loss of personal contact in every aspect of modern life, ironically, the use of an unfamiliar tool such as the Blackboard actually helped me communicate better with some other students, as we faced a shared problem and being compatriots somehow brought us closer.

Netiquette was something I decided that I had to learn before I was ‘brave’ enough to add my comment in the discussion forums. This was mainly because I was very used to the ‘Internet slang’ of using the short form of words such as CUL8R and I wasn’t very sure these would be acceptable and did not want to get on the wrong side of the lecturer unnecessarily. I did some reading on the topic and found a great deal of material on the Internet regarding Netiquette. In particular, I read the RFC 1855 (Hambridge, 1995), which was a sort of bible on netiquette. On reading it the reasons behind many of netiquette rules that I didn’t think were important, most of it seemed to be common sense and polite. The WIRED article by Leahy (2006) cited one good example of an email communication that had this sentence “Don’t work too hard”, which could be interpreted in a variety of ways – had this been addressed to me, I would have wondered, was the writer sarcastically implying that I was working too hard, perhaps trying to impress

someone, in which case I probably would have taken offence, or was it just a joke? Either way, it's difficult to interpret. I read the general rules for posting on Blackboard and saw that they weren't very different from the RFC 1855. There were only minor differences, some recommendations adapted to keep in view that this was an educational discussion board in an educational institution.

Going back to my interaction on Blackboard, I monitored the comments on the discussion board for while before I decided to post a somewhat inconsequential comment to test the waters. I had given a great deal of thought before deciding to participate in the discussion online. Initially, I thought that since participating in the online discussion forum wasn't compulsory, I need not participate; it would only take me more time to learn the rules, and then engage in a discussion that didn't really earn me any marks in my final score for the module. However, I spoke to some of my peers, and got the view that participating in discussions not only helped you clear your doubts, it also helped others; most often, someone else had the same question, but was just too scared to post it, and when you did, they were grateful to you; sometimes that made them bolder to start posting too. Then, one of the lecturers for one of the modules that was using Blackboard encouraged us to continue a discussion that took place in class online, and that was what spurred me on to leave me comment; however, having thought out my first post for very long before posting it, I feel that I somehow 'killed' it and it had the desired effect: it was so inconsequential, no one posted a reply to it. Funnily, I found this was somewhat disheartening, however, resolved to take part in the discussions better and managed to

follow through. The main benefit I obtained from the discussion boards is that if there are some strands of thought running on your mind about a topic that is being discussed, the discussion board offers you the opportunity to actually post those thoughts anytime, anywhere. On hindsight, communicating on the Blackboard discussion board did not have very different rules from communicating face to face in the classroom. One just has to remember that when posting on an online forum, the readers cannot see your face to gauge your expression and therefore are more likely to misinterpret your statements. Using 'emoticons', if these are acceptable, can help convey the tone of the message to a certain extent. Also, if you are always prepared to offer a clarification and apology if necessary if your message has been misinterpreted then you cannot go very much wrong.

There are indeed some excellent positives to the use of Blackboard (or any other Virtual Learning Environment) in the university. The use of the VLE allowed us to work at home (or as a group in one person's home) and enabled us to avoid spending the time travelling to university, and also the stress. We were able to discuss group assignments at a place convenient to the entire group, and as for individual assignments, there is a great deal to be said for sitting on one's own room with a pizza and coke and typing up an assignment. While it took some getting used to, once I got used to the system, I greatly appreciated the availability of all the information that was made available on an anytime, anywhere basis. However, I think that I would not like to pursue course of study that was conducted wholly through the VLE. This is because I felt that the face to face interaction I had with the lecturers of most modules was important, even if it consisted of me simply

sitting passively in class listening to the lecture. This is because I felt I could understand much more when it was the lecturer explaining a certain point in person, not reading the written word; additionally, during face to face interaction, I had the opportunity of clearing any doubts that popped into my mind, and one once occasion, the teacher drew a simple diagram which allowed me to grasp the concept quickly; this would not have been possible if we were discussing the topic on the discussion forum on Blackboard. If all the convenience of using a VLE in additional to face to face teaching can be made available in a cost-efficient circumstance, then I would definitely recommend the use of Virtual Learning Environments. As for discussions on Blackboard, with my experience, I am now a bit confident at posting my comments on discussion topics. Perhaps the next semester I may even be bold enough to start up discussion on new topics if the opportunity presents itself.

## References

Hambridge, S. (1995) *RFC1855: Netiquette Guidelines* (Available online at <http://rfc.net/rfc1855.html>- last accessed Aug 2007)

Leahy, S. (2006) *The Secret Cause of Flame Wars* Wired (Available online at <http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2006/02/70179>- last accessed Aug 2007)