Good online communication practice

People who use email and online discussion boards have developed certain conventions and rules over the years. This has become known as network etiquette or 'netiquette'. Many of these conventions may already be familiar to you, and many others are just plain common sense. Following these guidelines will make people more likely to respect you online and help to facilitate your online communications and study.

Breaches of this code of conduct may also result in action from the programme administrators that could ultimately affect your progress on the degree.

Respect for others

The most important point when communicating online is that you show respect for your fellow students and tutors. Do not use offensive language or insults at any time. Please show respect for cultural and religious differences when expressing your opinions. Remember that when you send an online communication to a discussion area you do not know exactly who will read it, or if it will be printed or copied, or sent to other people. So be polite. A good thing to bear in mind is that if you write about another person then you can expect that at some time in the future it is possible that person may read what you wrote.

Tone

Capital letters are considered to be the equivalent of SHOUTING, but may be used with care. You can highlight words by doing *this*. Some responses may sound rude if they are too terse or short, or you may send out a message in haste, and be misinterpreted. Never post messages or emails when angry or upset – a good idea is to sleep on it.

Humour

Research has shown that the use of jokes and humour does help people to learn effectively. However, it is important to remember that on this programme you will be part of an international learning community and that something that may be humorous in your culture may not be funny to somebody from another culture. It is therefore important that you are sure that your peers will understand and appreciate the humour in any jokes or ironic comments that you make. Without inflections of voice and body language it is easy for a humorous remark in a message to be misinterpreted. Subtle humour tends to get lost, so take steps to make sure that people realise you are trying to be funny. See the section entitled 'Language shortcuts' below for more information on techniques that can help to make it clear when you are making a joke.

Writing

Online communications have evolved to be less formal than letters. They often include jargon or slang terms (especially computer-related terms) and abbreviations. (See 'Language shortcuts' below.) When you are communicating informally (such as in an email or using the Student Cafeteria) it may be fine to treat online discussions like a verbal conversation and let your thoughts flow quickly – you do not need to go back to correct mistakes in grammar, spelling, or the logical sequence of your message. However, when you are participating in the online seminars and posting to course discussion areas then you should be more careful about the grammar, spelling, and presentation of your message (see 'Posting to discussion areas' below).

Language shortcuts

Emoticons ('emotional icons') can be used in online communication in order to prevent misunderstandings and to express feelings. Examples of popular emoticons include:

:-) smiling
:-(frowning or looking sad
;-) winking
:-o shock or surprise

Other language shortcuts that you might want to use are acronyms that are used in place of common phrases, which take a long time to type. Some examples are:
AFAIK as far as I know
IIRC if I remember correctly
IMHO in my humble opinion
LOL laughing out loud (beware: also 'lots of love'!)
ROTFL rolling on the floor laughing.

You can find more extensive lists of emoticons and acronyms on Dr Internut's website:
http://www.lake-online.com/internut/

Please restrict your use of all language shortcuts in course discussion areas and online seminars to very few well understood ones.

Dates and times

In the UK we often write dates as day/month/year in numbers (for example, 11th April 2002 = 11/04/02), but other parts of the world write month/day/year and would read the date 11/04/02 as November 4th 2002. Please try to remember to write dates in a clear format such as 11-Apr-02 that spells out the month in order to avoid such confusion.

It is also a good idea to avoid using words like 'today', 'tomorrow' and 'yesterday' and to use the date instead – remember that people may be in different time-zones and that it may already be 'tomorrow' where they are. You should also remember that people will be participating in the discussions over an extended time period and may not read your message until several days or even weeks after you have posted it. Please also bear in mind the difference in time zones when making any precise arrangements with students from different parts of the world (deadlines for posting a contribution, sending an email, etc.).

Name

You should include your name at the end of any communication.

Formatting

The person who reads your message may be using a different computer system from you. A message sent using, for example, a Japanese email program to another Japanese system will be able to send Japanese characters, but if such a message is received on another system it may be unreadable. There is a minimum common standard for online communications: send plain text. Formatting like bold, underline, and italic will not be understood by all systems. Even different fonts may cause problems. Try to view and write your communications using a fixed spaced font like Courier. In this font each character and space has the same width and columns of text, numbers and spaces line up on top of each other. Avoid using special or extended characters. For example, the £ sign may be turned into # when viewed using a different computer. Also keep your line length to around 65–70 characters in messages. Some computer systems do not wrap long lines, so your message will disappear off the right of the screen when someone else opens it to read it on their computer system.

Attachments

It is possible to include attachments in most forms of online communication (this includes postings to discussion areas). During online seminars the tutor may ask you to post answers to tasks. Please only attach files that have been created in widely used applications – otherwise the tutor and peers may not be able to read them.

Viruses

Please take care to use basic virus hygiene controls on your computer and to check attachments and anything you download for viruses. If you think you've got a virus, then try to find out if you got it from an email attachment or program, and warn the person who sent it to you. Do not assume that everyone you sent email to has caught the virus. Remember that it is going to look very embarrassing if you are the source of a computer virus on any courseware. Make sure that it does not happen!

Discussion area netiquette

The following netiquette issues apply particularly to the use of discussion areas and online seminars.

Posting to discussion areas

The key point when writing a message is clarity – ask yourself if everyone who may read your message will understand you. We advise you to do the following when participating in any programme-related discussion in a discussion area or as part of an online seminar:

• write in English
• write in proper sentences (although grammar and spelling need not be perfect)
• spell out any abbreviations when first used in the message you are writing
• put the message into context (i.e. quote part of the original message you are replying to if it helps place your question or response in context)
• do not quote all of the original message you are replying to unless it is absolutely necessary
• if you are starting a new discussion, make sure that you are in the correct area of the discussion area and name your discussion according to the course and topic concerned
• do not write in capitals – it is viewed as SHOUTING.

Think twice

While we want to encourage you to use discussion areas and post to online seminars as much as possible, don't get too enthusiastic and always just make a quick check before finally posting a message. Make sure your contribution is relevant to the topic. For example, try to avoid the classical post 'I agree', and adopt a more informative 'I agree because …'.

Checking the board regularly

Remember that the online discussions and online seminars are asynchronous – they do not take place live. People will be adding to the discussions over at least a two-week period so do not expect an instant reply to the messages that you post. It is therefore important that you get into the habit of checking the discussion area regularly. For example, you could decide to give yourself one hour three times a week to look at the discussion area. If you give yourself scheduled times to read and add to the discussion area, you are more likely to participate effectively and efficiently in the discussions. You should also remember that people will be studying things at different rates so you may need to wait a while to for a non-moderated discussion on a particular topic to get going. However, even if you have moved on to something else when the discussion gets going, you should try to participate as it will serve as revision.

Email

The following further netiquette rules apply particularly to the use of email.

Junk email

Please do not proliferate the sending of junk email amongst fellow students of the programme. In particular, **do not under any circumstances**:
• Distribute unsolicited email to fellow students concerning advertising material.
• Post any messages to fellow students relating to pyramid schemes or money-making scams.
• Proliferate chain letters such as those that claim that if you send an email to a number of other people good luck will come to you, but if you do not send it then you will get bad luck.
• Use email addresses of students on the programme to distribute online petitions.

If you receive unsolicited email of any of these types then the best thing to do is delete it straight away. If you suspect any students on the programme of being the source of unsolicited email messages then contact the programme administrators.

Space in your mailbox

Please remember that it is your responsibility to leave sufficient space at all times in your mailbox to receive emails and attachments from us.