

Please note: This document was originally written when the campus used an earlier LMS called bSpace. The campus now uses bCourses. Some of the features in bCourses work differently from those in bSpace.

Digital Communication and GSI/Student Boundaries

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Issues to Consider with Any Form of Digital Communication

1. What mode of digital communication best fits your communicative and organizational style?

When deciding which mode(s) of digital communication you will use in your courses, it may make sense to choose a mode that you already use and are familiar and comfortable with. If you decide to use a mode of digital communication that you have not used before, it is important to thoroughly familiarize yourself with the new form of communication before using it with your students.

2. How do you make the mode(s) of digital communication that you use accessible to students?

Since not all students are familiar with all modes of digital communication, it is important to ascertain whether your students have the necessary skills to use the form(s) of communication you have selected. You should always provide your students with detailed explanations of how to use modes of digital communication that are unfamiliar to them. For example, if you decide to ask students to post material on a blog or bCourses, you should make sure that they are familiar with the steps they must take to post their material.

3. How will your mode(s) of digital communication fit into your time management plan? How do you keep digital communication with students within a reasonable time frame?

Before using any form of digital communication for general communication with students or for special assignments or projects, you should consider how much time it will take. If electronic communication with students is a required part of your GSI tasks, you should speak with the faculty member in charge of the course about time expectations. Make a plan for when and how often you will access email and course management sites, and share that information with students. If you have a section syllabus, you should put this information in that document so that reasonable expectations about your availability are clear to students from the first day of class.

4. How can you make digital communication with students interesting and useful without allowing it to take up too much of their time?

You should not only think about how much time digital communication will take for you, but also how much time it will require from your students. Tools like bCourses and email allow GSIs to make interesting resources and articles available to students outside of class. While such resources are important for stimulating student interest, it is possible to overwhelm students if you send resources or communication too often. Similarly, if you require students to communicate electronically with you or other students on a regular basis, you should have reasonable expectations for the amount of time students should spend on these tasks outside of class. You might want to ask a few students to keep a log of the time spent on this aspect of their work for your class or section.

5. Is confidential or private information about students compromised through the form(s) of digital communication you use?

In using any form of digital communication, you must avoid disclosing any private information about students. Always err on the side of caution, as you may not be aware of which students have designated information as confidential. You should also make sure that you have a plan for keeping any personal or sensitive digital communications with students secure and confidential.

6. Do the form(s) of communication that you and your students use align with your teaching/learning goals and instructional strategy?

When thinking about what form(s) of communication are appropriate for general inquiries from students, special projects, and class activities, you should always consider how your use of digital communication aligns with your teaching/learning goals. For example, if one of your teaching/learning goals is to promote active collaboration among students, you should encourage students to use a form of digital communication that supports this goal. Setting up discussion forum on a bCourses where students can communicate with each other about questions or problems they have with course material is one way of using digital communication to reach this pedagogical goal. If you want students to come to section having completed the reading so that you can get everyone involved in class discussion, you might require that they post to the bSpace site a response to the reading prior to class. Regardless of what form(s) of communication you use with your students, it is important to make sure that digital communication supports, rather than undermines, your teaching/learning goals and instructional strategy.

7. Is your use of digital communication consistent with the expectations of the Instructor of Record?

Make sure that your use of digital communication is consistent with expectations that have been laid out by the Instructor of Record. For example, if that faculty member tells you to use a bCourses tool for communication with students, you should follow that direction. If the faculty member has told you not to use social networking systems due to the potential blurring of professional boundaries, you should refrain from doing so. If you disagree with the faculty member or find that certain activities are taking you excessive amounts of time, be sure to speak directly with the faculty member to find an appropriate solution.

Email

Email is an effective form of digital communication to keep in touch with your students outside of class time. You may use email for various types of communication with students such as sending out discussion questions, reminding students about deadlines, planning for review sessions, or answering students' questions. While email can be a fast and effective tool for students and GSIs to communicate with each other, laying out clear guidelines for email use helps clarify your expectations for students and can save you time during the semester. You should consider including your email policy in your section syllabus and reminding students of your policy throughout the semester. In addition to questions listed in the article "How Does Your 'Online Identity' Impact Classroom Climate? Strategies for Managing E-mail Communications and Social Networking Sites," you may also want to consider the suggestions below.

1. Which email account will you use to communicate with students?

Many GSIs have multiple email accounts that they use for professional and personal purposes. It is worth giving some thought to which email address you would like students to use when they contact you. It may make sense to open a folder specifically for student emails. Alternatively, you may consider opening a separate email account for student email; this may help you organize student email and control the amount of time you spend exclusively on student email. In addition, opening a separate email account will allow you to have a single place where you archive all past student emails. If you decide to open a separate email account for student use, you will need to make sure to check it regularly.

2. Where will you email students?

Students, like GSIs, may have multiple email addresses that they use for different purposes. Thus, it is important to either ask students for the email address where they would like you to send course related material or to tell them that you expect them to check their Berkeley email account on a regular basis. You can find a list of the email addresses that students have provided the University for official purposes under the bCourses People tool.

3. Will you use a course management site to send messages to students?

Course management websites (such as bCourses) often provide a convenient option for sending and archiving student emails. You may want to explore the "Conversations" function on bCourses to see if it will suit your needs. Check in with the faculty member to see if he or she has a preference for your communication with students.

4. If you do not use bSpace to email your students, how will you send emails to your entire class?

Please note: This item was originally written for an earlier campus LMS. The email features in bCourses are different. Emails can be sent to an entire course through BearFacts, but not through bCourses at this time.

You may choose to create a student email list in your email program to make it easier to email all of your students at once. If you do this, it is important to note that you cannot release students' emails to the class without their prior permission. In order to avoid compromising student privacy related to email, you should either ask your students for permission to release their email addresses to the class or blind copy (Bcc) all students so they cannot see each other's email addresses.

5. What are your expectations for the frequency with which students check and respond to email?

While it is important to have clear guidelines for how often you, as a GSI, will check your email, it is also helpful to let students know that they are also responsible for checking and responding to emails that you send to them. You may consider including a statement on your expectations for student email usage in your section syllabus. For example, you may include the following statement: “Throughout the semester I will send several emails to the class. You are responsible for checking your own email and for any of the content of the emails that I send out. I expect you to respond promptly, within 24 hours, to any inquiries that I send you via email.”

6. How can students contact each other outside of class?

It is important to let students know how they can contact each other outside of class. You may choose to suggest to students that they communicate with each other using the bSpace forum. You may distribute a class list of emails (with students’ prior permission) or you may ask students to share emails with one or more classmates. Many students may know other students in the course with whom they regularly communicate outside of class, but some students may not have any acquaintances in the course. If you do not plan on distributing a list of emails to the class, you may ask students to voluntarily swap emails with one or two of their peers on the first day of class so that they have someone that they can contact in case they miss class or have questions about course related material. Students may also want to voluntarily exchange emails when they are working together on a group project.

Learning Management Site (bCourses)

Learning management sites (LMSs) and course websites offer an efficient and easy way to communicate with your students and often a convenient way for students to communicate with each other. bCourses is the official LMS for UC Berkeley, and many GSIs and professors use it for various course-related purposes. Some GSIs and professors also have course websites or blogs on which they post course-related material. Below is a list of suggestions related to the use of LMSs and course websites.

1. Does the instructor of record for the course use a LMS? If so, will you use the tools available in the main LMS set up for the course?

Please note: This item was originally written for an earlier campus LMS. Sections work differently in bCourses.

If the professor or instructor you are working with uses a LMS for the course, you should think about whether it makes sense for you to create your own LMS for your section(s). If the professor has set up a bCourses site for the course and has given you access, you will be able to use a number of tools to communicate with your students. It may also be more convenient for students to have only one LMS to use for lecture and section instead of two separate LMSs. However, there may be instances in which it makes sense for GSIs to set up their own LMS or course website. Make sure it is done in consultation with the faculty member so that you can all be clear about the discrete purposes of the lecture site and section site and how they are being used.

2. How will you use the LMS to communicate with your students?

You can use a LMS, such as bCourses, to communicate with your students in a variety of ways. Let your students know which functions of the site you will use and which areas of the site they are expected to check for updates on a regular basis. When you post something new to the site consider emailing your students or announcing the addition in class.

3. How will your students use the LMS to communicate with you and with each other?

You may want to ask students to communicate with you using various LMS tools and functions. Tell your students which functions of the site you expect them to use. For example, do you expect them to contribute to a forum, chatroom, or wiki on your LMS? If so, how often? You should explain to students the guidelines for using these tools, how often you will be monitoring the site, and what kind of contributions you expect them to make to the site. Do you expect students to turn in assignments to the LMS? If so, you should explain to them where and how to submit their assignments.

More information about bCourses is available at <https://www.ets.berkeley.edu/discover-services/bcourses>.

Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

Social networking sites have become increasingly popular among college students in the last several years. A 2006 survey of 2,087 UC Berkeley students showed that four-fifths of all Cal students were using Facebook at that time.¹ The increasing popularity of SNSs also suggests SNSs as a possible tool for communicating with students about course-related material. Using them to support instruction, however, may present problems associated with student privacy and appropriate boundaries between GSIs and students. In addition to questions listed in the article “How Does Your ‘Online Identity’ Impact Classroom Climate? Strategies for Managing E-mail Communications and Social Networking Sites,” you may also want to consider the suggestions below.

Questions to Consider Before Using an SNS for Course-related Material

1. Is there a university policy about using Facebook with your students?

While the University does not have an explicit policy regarding the use of SNSs in teaching, the GSI Teaching and Resource Center urges GSIs to use bCourses rather than SNSs to minimize the chance of crossing appropriate professional boundaries and to ensure equal access to instructional communication. If GSIs decide to use Facebook for communication with students, we recommend that a separate Facebook group be created with explicit guidelines about what can be posted. Setting up a group has the benefit of not requiring you to be Facebook “friends” with your students.

¹ Radwin, D. (2006). *Undergraduates and Technology Fact Sheet 2006*. Office of Student Research, Division of Student Affairs. Retrieved March 11, 2009 at https://osr2.berkeley.edu/menu_control/Topics/student_data/reports/phtml

2. What's wrong with "friending" students or accepting an invitation from students to be "friended?"

When an instructor decides to "friend" all students in the course in order to communicate with them or to accept individual invitations to be "friended," he or she may now have access to private information that the student has on his or her site. Private information may in turn bias your view of the student and unconsciously affect your evaluation or treatment of students. Even when permissions are set in such a way as to prevent the disclosure of personal information, "friending" students may affect a GSI's rapport with his/her students in the classroom.

In addition, you cannot guarantee that all students use an SNS or want to, and some students who already have an account may feel uncomfortable with their instructor "friending" them. For legitimate reasons, students may opt out of using Facebook with you. If you then decide to communicate with the other students through Facebook or simply to accept invitations to be "friends" with whomever invites you, you may be setting up a situation of unequal access to course material.

3. Is it wise to become "friends" with students once the semester is over?

Some instructors tell students that they will accept invitations to be "friended" after the semester is over. If there is the slightest chance that you may be asked to evaluate the work of the student in the future (e.g., letter of recommendation, another class in which you will be the GSI), we recommend that you not become "friends" with students even after the semester is over.

If you do become "friends" with students on an SNS after you have submitted final grades, it is still important to pay attention to what kind of information about you is available to your former students. You should take care in adjusting your profile privacy settings to block students from seeing any photos or information that you would not share in a professional relationship. It is sometimes worth asking a friend if you can look at your profile from their account to see what information is visible. Some GSIs may choose to maintain both a professional and a personal account in order to control the information that is visible to their former students. For further information on Facebook privacy settings see "10 Privacy Settings Every Facebook User Should Know."²

4. How can I prevent the awkward situation of having to turn down a student's invitation to be his or her Facebook "friend?"

Make your policy explicit at the beginning of the semester. On your section syllabus you might include something like the following: "In order to maintain professional relationships with students, I do not accept invitations to be a Facebook friend from any student in my class. Communication about course-related matters will be done via bSpace or email." You should also include your email policies.

5. What happens if a student who is your Facebook "friend" ends up in your class?

² O'Neill, N. (2009). *10 Privacy settings every Facebook user should know*. Retrieved March 11, 2009, from <http://www.allfacebook.com/2009/02/facebook-privacy/>

If a real-life friend enrolls in your section, you should ask for the student to be transferred to another section so that there will not be a conflict of interest. Similarly, if you have a personal relationship with someone through Facebook, you should recuse yourself from having authority over their work. Being “friends” with some students and not others may give the appearance of and may lead to favoritism.

6. What precautions will you take to ensure that you engage in professional behavior on SNSs?

If you do become “friends” with former or current students on an SNS, you should not use the SNS to talk about course-related duties, complain about your sections or students, talk about the professor/instructor of record, or make comments about your department more generally. Don’t post pictures of yourself or information about yourself that you do not want others to see. Keep in mind that if postings on an SNS profile become public, they may have an impact on your professional life in the future.

Additional Resources

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