

Participating for Good in Online Interactions

from Spring 2020 online orientation

Campus Life & Inclusive Excellence (CLIE) challenges everyone at DU to **consider how our quick turn to all-online learning means many students, faculty and staff are suddenly venturing into less familiar ways of engaging.** Most of your faculty have spent their “break” completely recreating their courses for the new platform; and it’s just as important for students to take some time to consider how you will best contribute to and gain from the new e-environment.

We’ve gathered some suggestions below that, along with ongoing reflection and thoughtful decisions, can help you **demonstrate informed, intentional, constructive and equitable participation in online interactions** at the core of spring quarter. For each suggestion, we’ll provide a brief explanation, some points to consider before you participate, and/or some tips/resources for further exploration and action.

Be A Critical Consumer of Information

Check and cite sources; and don’t act on or share information from bad or questionable sources.

Consider:

- How *reliable* is the content? Memes and graphics that don’t cite sources might be incorrect, incomplete or biased. Can I find the same/ similar information from a few other sources?
- How *recent* is the article/post? Is the information current or outdated? Check the post date, or sometimes the URL, for indication of when it was uploaded.

Resources

- <https://libguides.ala.org/InformationEvaluation>

Clarify Expectations Early

If not initiated by the instructor, suggest, ask for, or even insist on setting some group guidelines (also called norms, groundrules, learning agreements, etc).

Making our expectations of one another clear and having everyone agree to them upfront helps everyone manage their own participation, empowers everyone (not just the instructor) to call one another back to them when they stray, and helps avoid surprises when we’re held accountable.

There are many online suggestions for developing these.

Speak (only) for yourself; being mindful of others

Clearly consider and label what is *your* experience or opinion, vs what is universally true.

- Speak for yourself (“I” statements)
- Avoid speaking for others and avoid generalizations, including *the universal “you”* (i.e., “When someone harms you, you should forgive them”), and *absolutes* (“[all] people are...”)

Consider

- Compared to others, how much space/time am I taking up? Am I the first person to speak again? Have I spoken/responded every time, blocked others from participating, or carried the load for everyone? When I share, for how long am I talking/writing? Am I adding new thoughts and perspectives, or repeating well-known or already shared information? Am I sharing just to share (checking a box), or because I have something to add?
- Am I contributing to any of the issues above through my sharing, silence or reactions?

Resources:

- **TIP:** Before sharing, answer the acronym WAIT: Why Am I Talking (or more generally Sharing?)
- www.uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/blended-learning/online-discussions-tips-students (Links to an external site.)
- [Using More Accurate and Inclusive Language](#) (PDF), among other resources at www.du.edu/studentlife/ie-education/online-resources

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Don't create (but don't necessarily avoid) conflict or emotion

Disagreement, conflict and emotions don't go away just because we aren't in the same room anymore. In fact, it can be easier to misspeak, misunderstand or avoid challenges because we don't get all the nuances of sitting near someone. And they aren't necessarily bad things; we just have to name and worth them together!

Consider

- Exchanging differing ideas helps us better understand and develop our own. Emotions are real and can be powerful motivators to action. Ask yourself, What am I passionate about, and why?
- So, while genuine emotions can be honest and enlightening, personal attacks are not. Critique ideas and actions, not feelings, experiences or people. What's my goal in sharing or responding? (To correct, clarify, shame someone, win?) What's the best time, words and tone for me to achieve that goal?
- Denying or dismissing others' experiences isn't helpful (and suggests others can do same to you). We don't have to like or agree with others' beliefs/opinions/perspectives; we can and should work to better understand them. (That's learning!)
- Help hold self and others responsible for both *intent and impact* of our sharing.

Resources

- differencebetween.com/difference-between-constructive-and-vs-destructive-conflict
- scientificamerican.com/psysociety/e2809cbut-i-didne28099t-mean-ite2809d-why-ite28099s-so-hard-to-prioritize-impacts-over-intents

Pause before you post

Especially if you're having a strong reaction to something someone's shared, perhaps your first reaction—while honest—won't be your best. Like taking a deep breath in spoken conversations, taking a moment to figure out what you're feeling can help you reshape what you initially thought or typed, to be more constructive.

Consider

- Whether giving compliment, comment or judgement, would I say it that way, or at all, if we were face-to-face? Am I commenting on the idea/topic, or on the classmate?
- **TIP:** Typed responses aren't the same as spoken words or text messages; and so probably need to be worded differently whatever the topic or tone. (Same with email or other messages to faculty, administrators, employers, etc!)

Have Concerns about how a classmate is engaging?

As noted above, the instructor may have the most authority, but everyone is responsible for sticking to ground rules and contributing to group learning. So...

- If appropriate, I can remind everyone generally (or the individual specifically) about group guidelines at a minimum, or ask whether they could further explain a sharing that seems problematic (perhaps they misspoke or you misunderstood).
- I can raise the issue in private message to instructor, describing specifics of the behavior, and sharing why it is.

These suggestions won't cover *all* aspects for your online learning success, or replace expectations set by each of your instructors/ classes. Check your syllabus, ask friends for tips, or do a quick web search for best practices that might work well for you. For example, blog.online.colostate.edu/blog/online-education and www.ustpaul.ca/upload-files/DistanceEducation/Online_Discussions_tips_for_students.pdf

And, while the tips above talk about classes, faculty/instructors and students, most of the advice and resources **apply equally well to any online (and even in-person!) community**—from formal student organizations, to job-related interactions, to casual networks of friends.

In fact, sharpened **self-reflection, critical thinking, and communication skills** will serve you well both for your graded schoolwork, as well as for broader participation in online communities for class, campus and beyond! (Check <http://blog.online.colostate.edu/blog/online-education/why-and-how-to-communicate-collaborate-and-network-in-online-classes>)