

Building Relationships for Ministry to Online Students

After several years of teaching in traditional brick-and-mortar environments, I now teach exclusively online at the undergraduate level. I miss the impromptu meetings with students in the hallway and the way people respond to positive feedback face to face. However, teaching online does not mean that traditional teachable moments disappear; they simply change place, time, and modality. Furthermore, the relationships so crucial to the professional, social, and spiritual development of students are not only possible, but also capable of thriving online. However, these essential elements to online student development do not result from random happenstance; they require intentionality and commitment—just as they do in traditional learning environments.

E-mail has proved to be my most powerful tool for building relationships and furthering my ministry with online students. Although students see my video likeness and hear my voice regularly throughout the course in introductory videos and video lectures, this is not as personal as my being able to meet them face to face. But when videos are combined with the intimacy of personalized e-mail text, this provides a humanizing element that helps to conquer the digital divide.

After trying several different approaches to connect with students and attempting to create the nurturing faith community Adventist education aims to provide, I have found 10 e-mail practices that have proved effective. I like to think of these as building on one another in sequence, not only for the purpose of providing students with a positive online experience, but also with the goal of building a relationship for witnessing.

1. Regularly e-mail online students.

I try to e-mail my students personalized messages at least once every week. Because students are not forced to enter a physical classroom during their daily schedule, many of them need frequent reminders about the existence of their instructor and the course. It can be easy for them to ignore or forget what only exists in the digital world, especially those students who are new to online learning or the digital environment in general.

Additionally, e-mails may be one of the very few contacts students receive from the institution. This is a chance to engage students not only in the context of the course, but also with the institution.

Connecting with students through e-mail also documents the student-instructor relationship. This can be useful for situations as diverse as in-

BY ADAM FENNER

forming the university's academic support office of students' struggles with a course, recording problems with technology that can be passed to the appropriate IT professionals for correction, or—as unfortunate as it may be—documenting violations such as plagiarism for possible disciplinary action.¹

2. Respond promptly to students' communications.

In today's constantly connected society, people have come to expect instant gratification, contributing to short attention spans. Customer service is not something at which tenured professors or academic institutions often excel, yet we should. Students in today's world are customers who have many options—if displeased with some aspect of a program, they can and will go elsewhere for a quality education, even a quality Adventist education. This is especially true in online learning, where the costs are often lower than traditional schooling, and physical location has little to no import.² Students can easily leave an online class and institution for another online alternative.

Furthermore, if students have a question or problem, how else are they supposed to deal with these issues? For all they know, their instructor is their only advocate at the institution. They rely on online professors to be reliable and productive in their communication. Although addressing students' e-mails within 24 hours of receiving them can be a challenge, it has been my experience that students regularly state their appreciation for prompt responses. If the schedule is heavily structured and does not allow a response within 24 hours, I let students know that e-mails will be answered at specific times of the day or days of the week, which will allow them to better anticipate a response.³

3. Follow through on e-mails.

Often, student e-mails sent to me are really intended for someone else, or contain questions or issues I cannot

address. Sometimes, students fail to communicate effectively, leaving me guessing about what they are trying to convey. However, I try to follow through with each student inquiry, whether it's my domain or not. I will call them if necessary or give them the e-mail address or phone number of someone who can help them. I keep a record of items I referred so I can follow up to ask the student via e-mail if his or her issue was resolved. Students in undergraduate online courses are often young and inexperienced, perhaps distracted by a life crisis, and commonly have to work several jobs to make ends meet. Older students often struggle with maintaining a family, work, and life balance in addition to taking courses online. Whatever the issue, students may need help navigating the online education experience. The professor's willingness to be their advocate can make the difference be-

tween an enjoyable semester or quarter and a disappointing one. Every encounter matters—whether online or face to face.

4. Carefully monitor the tone of e-mails.⁴

I always start my e-mails with "Dear [Student's Name]." With the busy pace of life in the digital age and the desensitization that can accompany social media's blunt and brisk nature, civility can easily slip away, rendering us no longer as courteous as we once were in educational settings. Furthermore, cross-cultural communication can prove difficult in any medium, as expectations vary greatly and in ways of which we aren't even aware.⁵ Sensitivity through the tone of our communication can help overcome some of the cultural distance and smooth over any social *faux pas* that may occur. When we're sensitive to students and demonstrate our interest



through language and tone, students know we care about them.

Remember, because of the digital divide, we are dealing with substantially less information than we would have in face-to-face relationships, and the potential for miscommunication using e-mail is high.⁶ Lacking body language and tonal cues, it can be easy to misinterpret students' messages, and for them to misunderstand ours.

In e-mail correspondence, when a student complains about something, or is upset, perhaps even furious about an issue, it is appropriate to demonstrate empathy and concern. If the complaint is specific to the course and it is confirmed that the instructor is at fault, an apology is appropriate. Instructors should be careful, however, to avoid apologizing on behalf of anyone else or the institution, since this could be interpreted as admission of responsibility and expose the individual or institution to financial liability should the complaint result in litigation. Faculty and staff may not be aware of all aspects of an issue, and may only hear the student's perspective. An apology, therefore, should only be rendered by the person involved in a dispute, and only if wrongdoing has been found.

While offering an "I'm sorry" and expressing concern about an issue is not always easy, it can make a world of difference for a person who is struggling with a personal issue of which the instructor may be unaware. This does not imply always letting students have their way. It is quite possible to affirm while simultaneously being firm. Doing so in a way that is empathetic and honest can bring closure to an issue quickly and simply.

5. Be specific.

I try to avoid saying, "great job" or "you did great work" about an assignment unless I follow these words with a detailed, descriptive response that

It is important for teachers to model how to respond to shared work and to provide students with guidelines for responding to the same. This can be particularly valuable when contrasting opinions or findings are demonstrated, which can translate directly to teachable moments.

communicates what did or did not work well on an assignment. This builds students' confidence in their abilities and shows them ways to improve. Without meaningful feedback, students will have no way of knowing whether they are on the right track or how to improve their work.⁷

6. Showcase great work.⁸

I e-mail outstanding classwork to the entire class. This gives the class a benchmark for higher-level work, and offers positive reinforcement to high performers. It is important for teachers to model how to respond to shared work and to provide students with guidelines for responding to the same. This can be particularly valuable when contrasting opinions or findings are demonstrated, which can translate directly to teachable moments. For example, when the topic of Islam and women comes up in my history classes, emotions typically run high, and people usually want to share their often strong and contrary perspectives. In this delicate environment, I always ask permission to share student work

with the class before doing so, and would strongly recommend this as good practice. Not asking permission can result in a breach of trust with a student, and potentially lead to students submitting complaints to the school's administration.

7. Ask questions of students.

Asking students about themselves and what they think about a particular topic is essential to building strong student-instructor relationships. People like being recognized as unique, and they appreciate those who reach out and attempt to build constructive relationships. This is an important part of the digital environment, which by its very nature can be dehumanizing. Also, it can be difficult to remember that there is a person on the other end of an e-mail or computer screen. Asking students questions that nurture rather than dehumanize not only helps them feel appreciated, but it also reminds the instructor of their uniqueness.⁹

8. Move the public to the private.

Discussion board interaction is required in my classes. However, moving students to a private discussion can be productive because it helps build the relationships that I enjoy and they deserve. I often find something with which I either agree or disagree in a student's work, and e-mail him or her about it. Students appreciate their ideas being taken seriously, and private messages reassure them that I support and care about their personal and educational journey. Long e-mail threads often result from such exchanges, and relationships are built in this manner.

With the success of relationship building between students and teachers also comes the danger of becoming overly familiar and crossing established boundaries that ignore appropriate student-teacher roles. No matter how open or confident I am in my relationship with a student, I never sign

an e-mail with my first name. Also, it is inappropriate for the teacher to divulge information of a sensitive nature, or that might jeopardize the student's success in the class or another class he or she may take in the future. Teachers should be careful to avoid misunderstandings and unethical behavior when interacting with students. Setting boundaries and keeping within them should always be the norm, and yet such restrictions need not become detrimental to connecting with students.¹⁰

9. Be vulnerable.

Students notice when teachers and professors are open with them. Being open and vulnerable allows people into one's life and thoughts, and this is a reliable way to form trusting relationships. I regularly share personal experiences and my own philosophical questions with my students because it lets them know they aren't alone in their struggles and enables them to better relate to me. When students trust educators, not only do they enjoy their learning experiences more, but they also want to perform better.¹¹ Every student with whom I have had a reasonably good relationship online has performed better in my course as a result.

10. Witness through e-mail.

College students, regardless of age or stage of maturity, often question their faith. Perhaps no other time in a person's life is more crucial to his or her faith journey. Sometimes, when students go through a crisis of faith, no one is aware of it.¹²

I have found a number of ways to connect with students spiritually. One is to integrate faith into the course content as much as possible. In my video lectures, I pose spiritual questions and ask students to pause the video and respond to my queries. On the discussion board, I ask questions that are overtly religious and spiritual, and require my students to interact with one another in their responses.

At times, students who are not Ad-

ventists feel unable or uncomfortable answering these questions or fulfilling an assignment, so I work to solve this problem on an individual, person-to-person level, which often means making accommodations that benefit both the student and the class.

Whenever students indicate that they might be questioning the church, God, or their faith in general, I reach out via e-mail. I try not to miss the opportunity to support students' vertical relationship with God when they say they are struggling with their faith, but I also seek to create an environment that encourages all students to think spiritually and to share their thoughts and feelings. This way, even when they aren't openly stating their questions or thoughts, they are at least presented with opportunities to do so.

When I respond to a student with the intent of witnessing to him or her, I always consider the individual's faith journey. I avoid assumptions about students as much as possible, and instead try to delve deeper into *what*

they are dealing with and then explore *why* they might be dealing with that particular issue. This can be easily done without passing judgment, or being dogmatic or prescriptive.

I attempt to garner as much information about a student's experience with an issue before addressing it. When I ask students about a spiritual issue, they will usually elaborate on how it relates to them, but eventually they will ask me questions about it. At that point, when a student raises a spiritual question with me, I generally feel comfortable enough to respond by sharing the Adventist message.

If instructors and professors have established positive relationships with students and have demonstrated vulnerability and honesty with them, they can make a huge difference in students' lives at this crucial time. Often, getting students to open up about an issue further or even to explore their own thoughts requires greater openness from me. I divulge reflections and experiences from my own faith jour-

Sources for Additional Reading

Bender, Tish. *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment*. 2nd ed. Sterling, Va.: Stylus Publishing, 2012. Print.

A well-received and accessible book, in which the author explores how educators can improve their interactions with students and enhance collaborative learning in digital education.

Boyd, Danah. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014. Print.

Danah Boyd examines how teenagers develop social identities through social media, and how they deal with issues such as online privacy and bullying.

Conceição, S. C. O., and R. M. Lehman. *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to "Be There" for Distance Learners*. Hoboken, N.J.: Jossey-Bass, 2010. Print.

This book is a research-based approach to exploring how student satisfaction and retention are improved as a result of online interaction.

Major, Claire Howell. *Teaching Online: A Guide to Theory, Research, and Practice*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Print.

The author explores many of the practical and theoretical adjustments required by online teaching. The book is filled with powerful examples, research, and useful explanations, making it of interest to anyone involved in online education.

ney on a regular basis to my students, and have often been surprised by the positive results.

I have been in contact with some of my students for years after their class concluded. Online students will request recommendations for jobs and other schools from me, but many students will also e-mail me about issues of faith they face years after our initial relationship began via e-mail. Several students continue to write, call, or visit me for spiritual guidance years after I had them in class. It's these opportunities for mentorship and positive relationships that help provide the added value of Adventist education. Everyone needs someone he or she can trust and connect with spiritually, and I am happy to serve in that role anytime.

My initial reluctance to teach online was unfounded. It has been my experience that it is possible—and for some students, even more effective—for teachers to build and maintain meaningful relationships with students online. The fact that my online students regularly write to me to discuss their faith and to share their concerns and successes validates my opinion that Adventist education can be effective in the online environment as in the traditional classroom. 🍃

This article has been peer reviewed.



Adam Fenner, PhD, is Director of the Adventist Learning Community, sponsored by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Dr. Fenner finds satisfaction in coordinating the development of ministry training and teacher-certifi-

cation courses that will make professional development only a click away for lay members and church employees alike. He earned his doctorate from American University in Washington, D.C., and his specialty is U.S.-Latin American relations. He has taught history in Honduras and currently teaches world history online at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. While pursuing his doctorate, he worked professionally as a freelance researcher at the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Recommended citation:

Adam Fenner, "Building Relationships for Ministry to Online Students," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 80:1 (January-March 2018): 30-34.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E-mails can serve as documentation of assignments, advice from teacher to student, class participation, and a variety of other interactions between teachers and students. They may even be the first source of documentation of plagiarism or academic dishonesty. For this reason, they are admissible as supporting documentation, should a complaint be filed against the professor or if there is a dispute about a grade.
2. For a detailed study of the relationship between frequent student interaction, satisfaction, and performance, see Anthony G. Picciano, "Beyond Student Perceptions: Issues of Interaction, Presence, and Performance in an Online Course," *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 6:1 (July 2002): 21-40: <http://www.anitacrawley.net/Resources/Articles/Picciano2002.pdf>.
3. Taylor Massey, "Student v. Instructor: Turn-around Time for Out-of-Class Responses," *Cengage Professional Development and Training Blog* (December 2014): <https://blog.cengage.com/student-v-instructor-turn-around-time-class-responses/>.
4. Michelle Schwartz, "Effective Online Communication," Learning & Teaching Office, Ryerson University: http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/Online_Communication.pdf.
5. Tara Bahrapour, "Frederick Schools Employee Fired After Tweet," *The Washington Post* (January 17, 2017): B3. Available online at <https://wapo.st/2HYC37Y>.
6. Julie Ann Amos, "Basic Body Language and Communication" (May 2015): <http://www.bodylanguageexpert.co.uk/BodyLanguageAndCommunication.html>.

www.bodylanguageexpert.co.uk/BodyLanguageAndCommunication.html.

7. For a deeper look at effective feedback, see Grant Wiggins, "Seven Keys to Effective Feedback," *Educational Leadership* 70:1 (September 2012): 10-16: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept12/vol70/num01/Seven-Keys-to-Effective-Feedback.aspx>; and Susan M. Brookhart, *How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2017): <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/116066.aspx>.

8. For a demonstration of how showcasing student work has proved effective in teaching Common Core standards, see Ross Brewer, "Using Anchor Papers to Help Teachers and Students Understand the Common Core" (August 2012): <http://www.exemplars.com/blog/education/using-anchor-papers-to-help-teachers-and-students-understand-the-common-core>; and for a resource dealing with showcasing student work in higher education, see Winona State University's "Enhancing Student Learning: Seven Principles for Good Practice": http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p4_6.

9. For additional information on asking questions of your students, see Brandon Cline, "Asking Effective Questions" (2017): <https://teaching.uchicago.edu/teaching-guides/asking-effective-questions/>; Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, "Using Questions to Drive Inquiry," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 78:3 (February/March 2016): 11-13: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae20167803103.pdf>; and Larry Burton and Donna J. Habench, "Getting Students to Think: Using Questions Effectively in the Classroom," *ibid.* 66:1 (October/November 2003): <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200366012006.pdf>.

10. Mallory Simon, "Online Student-Teacher Friendships Can Be Tricky," *CNN* (August 2008): <http://www.cnn.com/2008/TECH/08/12/studentteachers.online/index.html?eref=>.

11. Hayeon Song, Jihyun Kim, and Wen Luo, "Teacher-Student Relationship in Online Classes: A Role of Teacher Self-disclosure," *Computers in Human Behavior* 54 (January 2016): 436-443.

12. Scott McConnell, "LifeWay Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church" (August 2007): <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church>.