

“Let’s define altogether the rules of the game”

Golden rules for Computer Mediated Learning

Summary of the Capacity Building Sessions in Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany and Italy

Communication

| Golden Rules | Short explanation and motivations (why it is important) |
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| Be short and concise | Complex statements on multiple topics make it difficult to follow especially when consequent comments are made in parallel. Therefore, every speaker should try to limit the statement to one topic only and make another statement later if needed on the rest. |
| Be straightforward about your thoughts | In the virtual environment, it is hard to grasp the situational cues that we use in real-life communication. Hence, you need to be clear about your thoughts, even placing yourself in the recipients’ perspective and do not expect that they will grasp it “between the lines”. But be careful not to be rude! |
| Define the modality of interactions | Establish the main ways of interacting during the session, such as when and how to intervene, when and how to ask questions, when and how to get the answers. All team members should have the opportunity to express themselves. |
| Be clear about the task | Give attention to task design and the processes that will be used to complete it. Make sure that there is clarity about the work process, with specifics about who does what and when. This awareness is fundamental for setting up the entire communication process and for defining the expected outputs for each phase/activity. |
| Communicate frequently | Maintain a frequent (daily) and steady communication with the participants. This gives the impression of proximity that is so important but often missing in virtual communication. |
| Communicate openly | Do not be afraid to ask questions, acknowledge when you do not know something and accept constructive criticism. |
| Follow-up | Follow up and do “after-action” reviews to evaluate how things are going and identify processes needing adjustments. |

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| Meet deadlines | Inform others if you are running out of time. |
| Develop communication guidelines | Communication guidelines provide directions to questions such as which communication channels to use in which circumstances, date and time of getting together, topics, participants, individual responsibilities, etc. It also establishes the norms of behaviour in the virtual environment. |
| Make sure all materials are available to all | The shared information should also be accessible and available to all. |

Behaviour and attitudes

| Golden Rules | Short explanation and motivations (why it is important) |
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| Get to know each other | Despite the physical distance and in some cases the lack of visual contact, it is beneficial that the participants in the online communication know each other in order to set a homogenous working environment and collaboration tone. The personal contact is important and should be enhanced. Thus, allow for some time (and a tool/platform), socialise, share interests and personal information, learn about each other and like this "humanise" the virtual face of the team. |
| Perceived proximity | Making participants feel close even though they are miles away is critical for virtual communication. Warm emoticons, tailor profiles with pictures, etc. are symbolisms that give us the perception of closeness. Use them! |
| Consider cultural differences | While working together, participants still have differences, such as culture, mentality, organisational and personal attitudes to the task, etc. Identifying oneself and being interested in the other, respecting each person's ideas and sensitivity and dealing with each other without prejudice are important prerequisites for pleasant and profitable collaboration. |
| Ensure equality for all | There is no hierarchy, do not usurp a common space and make joint decisions by seeking consensus of all group members. |
| Respect, support and encourage each other | Agree to disagree since differences make us stronger. |
| Behave proactively | Take the initiative in your field of expertise, step out of the comfort zone and move beyond the boundaries of your knowledge. |

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| | Leverage the background of those team members who have experience of working in virtual teams to motivate the others. |
| Encourage engagement and active participation | Involving all team members in the decision-making process and making sure nobody is left out will result in increased proactiveness and decreased miscommunication. In order to encourage engagement, use online team building activities that will sustain the good mood and tighten the relationship. Stimulate team members to choose tasks and responsibilities. All contributions are worthy. |
| Be responsive | Make sure you acknowledge and reply to participants' posts, comments or contributions. Do not leave people with the impression that they are not being heard. |
| Explain yourself | Express your ideas precisely but not in too many words. Body language is not part of the asynchronous communication and almost no one reads a lot online. Be clear about what the workgroup is expected to achieve, how the desired end results look like, including specific criteria for quality or completion. |
| Focus on results and problem-solving | Keep in mind that perfect is the enemy of good. |
| Accept mistakes | Learn both from your own and others' mistakes. |
| Build and sustain trust | Try to get to know the other colleagues, their needs, and respect their opinions. Building an environment of trust and support will empower every single team member to be productive and feel respected. Trust is of paramount importance for efficient and successful communication while the lack of trust leads to complications and confusion. |
| Be active yet patient | Pushing someone to do something works in most cases but have in mind that other team members might not be ready to answer your question at the current moment. |
| Be open and inclusive | Virtual tools reduce the social cues that help team members bond, which can diminish motivation to share ideas. Therefore, it is important to always be open and inclusive of all team members. |
| Stay positive | Qualities that contribute to a more comfortable atmosphere and do not impede others are sense of humour, tolerance and the ability to withstand constructive criticism. Control the emotional dimension of the group and take care of their motivation. |
| Keep an open mind | Embrace new ideas and encourage innovation. |

Collaboration

| Golden Rules | Short explanation and motivations (why it is important) |
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| Schedule time and activities | Plan individual and group activities and share them in advance. Provide a bulletin board or a platform to share availability. |
| Stick to time and agenda | It is important that everybody sticks to the timing. Sometimes it happens that people miss the exact time when the meeting starts. It should not be considered that everybody is available for communication at any time just because he/she is online. Establish the structure of a meeting by defining its agenda in advance. |
| Stay in touch | When it comes to virtual tasks that require online collaboration, everybody should be aware of what is going on. Team members might get stuck in a particular section or be unaware of how their colleagues' work affects their part. Clear communication helps everyone to stay on par with each other and the progress. Potential challenges and gridlocks can be identified and ironed out. Keep everyone well-informed and have a platform where information can be shared. |
| Set realistic and clear internal deadlines and stick to them | Internal deadlines are important and necessary when collaborating online. They serve as a motivator towards execution and completion of common goals. They help online teams to focus and collaborate on what needs to be done, and when. They enhance team accountability and motivation and serve as a mechanism to ensure better quality of work and a higher level of satisfaction with the overall task. |
| Share responsibilities and allocate tasks | Tasks and responsibilities should be shared and assigned within the team and roles should be defined. Defining a "roadmap" that includes rules and the assignment of well-defined roles is fundamental in order not to lose the rhythm of communication and to empower and strengthen the sense of belonging to the group of each participant. |
| Nominate a moderator and task leaders | Unlike physical presence, online meetings have characteristics that make parallel talking extremely unproductive, such as latency of the communication channel or inability to see all participants. Therefore, a moderator can contribute a lot by ensuring that everybody is given an opportunity to share ideas. The moderator should be entitled to certain powers and obligations (like limiting the time for individual statements or making sure total time |

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| | restrictions are met) and have certain skills (such as good communication, open mindedness and empathy). There could be a separate task leader for each separate task. |
| Moderate discussions | End a discussion if it threatens to go off-track. For example, if a potential conflict is forming, it should be approached in an individual discussion. |
| Build in flexibility | It is important that changes can be made and ad-hoc meetings organised if needed. Strive for interactivity and group dynamics (e.g. switch roles). |
| Develop teamwork spirit and motivate team members to participate | The willingness to collaborate should be encouraged by different means, such as sending the syllabus in advance but also sending interesting and funny materials on the topic. Team members and their opinions should be respected. People who have difficulty communicating should be encouraged to participate. The final results should be satisfactory to all and made visible. |
| Listen actively and get feedback | Timely feedback is crucial. The different tasks and results should be assessed in order to agree on the final outcome. If the feedback is provided on time, the process can be re-directed easily. If the feedback is delayed, there are risks that some participants are working in the wrong direction or work is duplicated, which is a waste of time and effort. When working online, direct non-verbal feedback is lacking, making it even more important to structure the process. Feedback also supports building mutual trust. |
| Make it a habit | Encourage yourself and your team members to turn the online collaboration into something that you do often and regularly. Set regular video meetings and take the lead if you feel like your team needs direction. Don't hesitate to seek group feedback and ideas and offer resources and insights so others can learn and share. Regular engagement with the team members will help instil a sense of trust, respect, and responsibility. |

Technology, security and data protection

| Golden Rules | Short explanation and motivations (why it is important) |
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| Explore various technological options | Find the most comfortable, fast and easy-to-use platform for online communication and use the full potential of the available technology (e.g. polls, notations, visuals, etc.). |

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| Make sure technology is available and reliable | The selected technology should be available to everybody, user and installation friendly. Its reliability should be tested in advance. All team members should be able to use it (by sharing a guide, organising a training session, assigning a "buddy", etc.) |
| Match the technology and the task | The more complex a task is, the closer you should get to in-person communication. If you want to discuss a complex issue, use tools allowing real-time interaction. If you just want to share information, use e-mail or similar techs. |
| Pay attention to security and data protection | It is important to build an environment of trust enhanced by secure technology and data protection. |
| Keep the Netiquette | Keeping ethical communication and acceptable online behaviour as well as a good "cyber hygiene", such as not disclosing personal data or compliance with copyrights is essential. |

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