# Set Reasonable Expectations for your Availability

In this age of twitter and text messages, faculty fear that students expect near-instantaneous responses to their questions. I hear this especially when talking with faculty about adding an online component to their courses. One way to manage student expectations is by being proactive and communicating your availability up-front and often. I suggest a two-part solution to my faculty:

1. Use the discussion board in your LMS, and create a forum called “Instructor’s Office.”

Tell students that this is the place to post any questions about the course, whether it’s about content or an assignment. That way every student can see all the questions and answers. The only time a student should contact you privately should be when the question concerns a grade, or another confidential matter.

If a student sends you a question by email, respond “What a great question! I’m going to respond in the “Instructor’s Office” forum so everyone can see the Q&A.” When posting the question, start with “This question came to me via email, but I am answering it here so you all can benefit.” After this happens a few times, students will quickly catch on.

1. Tell students when they can expect you to access the discussion forum, so they can anticipate your response time. I put this information in my syllabus, telling students that I check the “Instructor’s Office” first, before doing anything else, so posting their questions there is the best way to ensure a response. I indicate my availability in broad strokes, using a table. For an online class, or a course with a lot of homework, the table might look something like this:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Time | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| Morning |  | **X** |  | **X** |  |  |  |
| Mid-day | **X** |  | **X** |  | **X** |  |  |
| Afternoon |  |  |  | **X** |  |  | **X** |
| Evening |  | **X** |  |  |  |  |  |

If the box is checked, it’s a guarantee that at some point during that time frame, I will log in and address the posted questions. I might log in more frequently, but never less. In the above example, I’m checking in once or twice a day – on the assumption that a student who has posted a question about an assignment cannot proceed without the response. In a face-to-face course that is primarily reading-based, I might modify the table to only once a day.

The system works well – students know when they post a question how long to expect before checking back. Sometimes, I find that students have answered each others’ questions about the content, and all I need to do is confirm that they are on the right track. In practice, each login often takes only a few minutes, because there are relatively few questions each time. I have an enduring record of the Q&A in each course, and my email box is not as stuffed.

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