

# A Literature Review on the use of Emoticons to Support Online Learning

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## How are emoticons used to improve electronically-mediated communication in online learning?

### Method



#### Search

- Searched ProQuest and EBSCO;
- Used keywords: "emoticons," "online," and "learning";
- Initially found 58 articles;
- Removed duplicates and added additional articles from reference lists;
- Ended up with 67 articles.

#### Review

- Randomly assigned articles to reviewers;
- Three different reviewers reviewed each article;
- Reviewers summarized research and themes in Google form;
- Results were combined.



### General Themes

Two types:

1. The icon or emoji, which pictorially represents a human face
2. The keystroke-based, symbolic emoticons :-)



### Emoticons and Group Differences

- Differences between men and women's use of emoticons remains the most popular groups to compare. Research remains inconclusive.

### Emoticons and Social Contexts

- Research suggests the social context or environment (i.e., both the application as well as the context) influences how people use emoticons more than any single variable such as gender, nationality, or even age.

### Online Learning Themes

#### Improving Communication

- Emoticons can soften a negative tone of criticism, disapproval, or sarcasm (Locke & Daly, 2007; Stapa & Shaari, 2012). Research suggests that different uses of emoticons can counter the ill-effects of absent social context cues specifically in educational settings (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

#### Enhancing Social Presence

- Research suggests emoticons can enhance students' perceptions of social presence in online learning environments that rely predominantly on text-based EMC (Aragon, 2003; Lahaie, 2007; Tu, 2002).

#### Building Community

- Emoticons can help facilitate community building by clarifying EMC, establishing social presence, and building cohesion (Huang et al., 2008; Rourke et al., 1999).

### Abstract

Effective use of electronically-mediated communication (EMC) technologies is fundamental to digital literacy and, therefore, a high-demand competency in business and society. However, the use of EMC technologies can be challenging in educational contexts because they tend to rely on text-based formats where the meaning and intent may be lost in translation from thought to posted message. Therefore, online educators value techniques that have the potential to improve the quality and effectiveness of text-based communication. One such technique is the use of emoticons to represent emotional and personality nuances present in face-to-face communication. In this session, we present an overview of the emoticon literature, and share potential research directions and instructional recommendations for online educators.



### Instructional Recommendations

#### Enhance teaching presence

Use emoticons when communicating with students to increase teaching presence. Emoticons are one way to express emotion as well as clarify the expression of emotion or intent. This may help students better understand their instructor's approach to the course and the content (i.e., teaching presence) while at the same time getting a better sense that their instructor is "real" and "there" (i.e., instructor's social presence).

#### Provide personalized feedback

Personal, individualized feedback can help establish social presence in online courses (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014). Instructors should strive to use paralanguage and emoticons to help personalize and humanize feedback.

#### Soften critical feedback

Emoticons may be used to soften the tone of critical feedback so that students are more open to receiving and processing critical feedback; emoticons can essentially have a similar effect as audio feedback, which has been shown to help students hear the nuances in an instructor's voice (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007; Wilson, 2009).

#### Establish clear expectations for emoticon use

Students are often unsure how best to communicate in online courses. Even when students are well-versed in EMC for social purposes, they are often unsure of the appropriate way to communicate for an academic/professional context. Therefore, instructors should establish clear expectations about the use of emoticons, as well as other paralanguage, in their online courses. When establishing expectations for emoticon use, instructors should keep in mind that students from different countries, from diverse cultural contexts, and with different levels of experience with EMC (i.e., with different levels of digital literacy) might need additional support (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). Instructors should reinforce these expectations through modeling the appropriate and effective use of emoticons (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999; Woo & Reeves, 2008) and possibly even holding students accountable for their appropriate and effective use of emoticons.

#### Go beyond emoticons

Emoticon use does not always address the instructional goals of improving communication, enhancing social presence, and building effective learning communities in online courses. Emoticons are one strategy that should be used in conjunction with others to achieve these goals.