Guidelines on virtual debates

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Introduction

Interaction in virtual environments and the debate as a learning tool.

In some virtual learning environments the interaction that is produced is mediated by technology, and the possibilities that this offers us are enormous, since it allows the students to coincide in an asynchronous (or synchronous) way, and helps them to build their own learning. The Virtual Campus of the UOC provides these multidirectional interactions in the different classroom spaces, preferably in the forums and the debates, meeting places for teachers and students that, at the same time, are spaces for information exchange and collaborative work. In the forum, the students can pose doubts, advance tasks of the course, participate in the preliminary phase of training for working teams, formulate questions, propose readings, etc. It is a space that implies sociability,

> «a microcosm, with rules, its own rules of operation, in which positions, status, functions, etc. are negotiated. In no way is it a simple container of messages, a mere technical functionality, a concept, or the simple backdrop for a relationship game. A virtual forum is a microenvironment, a set of events that mark the birth of the phenomena of sociability. It is, to say it another way, a basic element of the social life in virtual environments».
>
> Núñez, Gálvez and Vayreda (2003).

As the authors indicate, it is not a simple container of messages, but something more: **a space that generates relations and in which learning is also made possible**. Virtual debate, which is a type of forum, is an example of this, since it is usually part of one of the tasks that are carried out in the educational plans of courses and which is aimed at a very notable skill set: **acquiring communication skills in a virtual learning environment**. This aim is not present only in the curriculum of CIT Skills, but rather it accompanies the student throughout his studies in the UOC. Communicative skills, which are intimately related with social skills, are a part and parcel of social skills and have to be put into play in a similar way to how they develop in the offline world. Nevertheless, in an environment mediated by the CIT where the debate is held there are some distinctive rules, common to a hipertext format, and in which it is necessary to keep in mind the elements of communication that play a part, with the consciousness of the asynchrony (there is no coincidence in time) and the need for collaboration to generate knowledge.

In this material we will begin by defining what a virtual debate is, putting emphasis in its importance with respect to communication and collaboration; we will note its aims and will situate it in the frame of argumentative texts, highlighting the value of argumentative technique and of the formal rules of participation, as well as the need to follow a correct digital attitude (etiquette). Then we will focus on the phases of the debate (preparation, development,

and conclusions). We cannot forget the organisation of the debate and its architecture, in the same way that it is necessary to make mention of conversation threads and of the role of the educator as a moderator. Finally, we will analyse the evaluation criteria for the virtual debate and how they allow us to conclude that the most important skills objectives have been achieved.

1. What is a virtual debate? A space of participation in the classroom

In this first section we will study what a virtual debate is as a form of communication and collaboration online and as a space for learning. We will also define its fundamental aims.

1.1. Definition

A virtual debate can be defined , from a technical point of view, as an asynchronous forum in which different participants, with the presence of a moderator, take part regularly (and with a time limit) by means of the discussion on a subject proposed beforehand.

It is **a space for communication**, since interaction between the participants is produced, and these put their communicative skills into practice in an environment regulated by a moderator. In the UOC, these skills belong to some strategies and a methodology defined in the educational plan of the course; therefore, from an academic point of view, it provides a formal space of interaction.

The communication is **asynchronous and non-sequential**, since there is not necessarily a coincidence in time and it is not necessary to consult the messages in a strict order. There is a time limit for participation, defined by the days that the virtual debate is open, and in this period it is not necessary that everyone participate at the same time, but a student can read the messages published and have a window of time to prepare their own. Here we find a clear difference with regard to face-to-face debates, which are more spontaneous, but also have their advantages.

Therefore, the debate offers us a **space for reflection** on a topic that has been predefined and that has the support of a practical case or of texts that promote the discussion. These mark some thematic focus points around which different threads of conversation will be developed simultaneously.

The debate is set up as **an open forum of participation**: the receiver of the messages is the group of students of the course and their professor/collaborator, who exchanges his roles for that of broadcaster/speaker, interacting with relative frequency throughout the process.

One of the most striking aspects of virtual debates is their **collaborative potential**: although it loses spontaneity in comparison with offline debate, it can favour the construction of knowledge by means of the enrichment produced by the exchange of well thought out opinions, counterarguments, the

revision of one´s own positions, a recognition of the others' views, the promotion of critical thought, and the learning of the attitudes and values of a virtual environment:

> «The online learning environment is particularly appropriate for written reflection, group interaction and, along with this, collaborative learning. In communication via computer, the student, by means of his/her interaction with classmates and experts that might not be working together in space and time, builds knowledge in a process in which the participants explore problems, argue their positions reflexively and reevaluate their positions.»
>
> Ruiz Molina (2007, pág. 5).

It is logical, then, that the virtual debate also becomes a space **of argumentation** (Guitert and Romeu, 2008): the exchange of points of view on the analyzed thematic topic has to follow, as we will see, an order in the presentation of ideas that allows us to see how they are related with each other and, from the prior information that the students have, shows the bond between the theses proposed and their demonstration. It is necessary that in the debate new ideas appear and that the already expressed ideas are not reduced or paraphrased. And between these ideas there must be a bond that provides them with consistency.

In the end, in conclusion, the virtual debate becomes **a privileged space of learning**, in which the participants make it possible for data and the information transmitted to attain the rank of knowledge built in a process of discussion that is not a simple sum of messages, but a very solid unified structure.

1.2. Objectives

As we have already commented above, the UOC virtual debate attempts to attain a skills objective of great importance:

> Acquire communication skills in a virtual learning environment.

These communicative skills will be put into play throughout a student´s academic career and it will also be of use in their professional life. Although it is an objective that is evident in the subjects of CIT Skills, it is important not to forget other aims that are also found in face-to-face debates: the use and processing of information, team work, and critical thinking:

> «In a more specific way, it aims for the student to acquire knowledge of the subject; sharing knowledge, resources, and experiences with classmates in the framework of a group practice while evaluated individually, and which familiarises them with tools for autonomous work for learning.»
>
> Ruíz Molina (2007, pág. 5).

Undoubtedly, the asynchronous debate favours collaborative work via the interaction provided in a space where the students participate actively by reading the contributions of others and generating their own with prior preparation, opening topics of discussion and responding to those already open, sharing links and files and promoting argumentative techniques, always with the moderation of the teacher, who can intervene more or less often, depending on the situation. In summary, an exercise of reflective writing based on a document or reference case from which the communicative and dialectic skills of the participants can be deployed.

Thus, together with the general aim of the debate, we can enumerate other specifics that contribute to its pedagogical potential:

1) Acquire knowledge of the subject via the reading of the case or the accompanying document.

2) Use digital information reasonably, quoting sources and incorporating them consistently into the discussion.

3) Learn to employ the argumentative technique, starting from premises and deducing conclusions. If necessary, generate counterarguments.

4) Learn to debate in a virtual environment, putting into play your own ideas and respecting those of the others. This allows promotion of collaborative work and the collective construction of knowledge.

5) Follow the formal rules of participation in a virtual debate.

6) Employ properly the conversation threads: know if it is pertinent to open a new one or respond to those already in use.

7) Learn to space your contributions and not publish them all at the same time.

8) Differentiate between the structure of a virtual debate and other textual typologies to establish a moderate extension of the messages.

9) Deal with the concepts related with the case or document at hand and do not go off the subject.

10) Carry out a moderation of the debate (by the professor) that does not prevent spontaneity and fluidity.

11) Respect the starting and ending times of the debate.

12) Keep a correct digital attitude at all times, following the rules of etiquette.

2. The virtual debate: argumentation, rules, and attitudes

In this second section we will place the interventions of the debate within the framework of the argumentative texts, learning the techniques that will allow us to carry out appropriate, coherent, and cohesive interventions. We will define the formal norms of participation in the virtual debate and, to finish, we will approach the digital attitude and the rules of etiquette in a discussion of these characteristics; that is, the rules of behavior and attitudes that we must follow in any virtual environment.

2.1. The argumentative texts. Argumentative techniques

The debate in virtual environments is a space for reflection, for the exchange of points of view on a subject related with the studies, from a case that is being analysed or from a reference document. The comments from the students have to express at all times **very well-argued ideas**, that are not a copy of those already posed, but which open new, distinctive lines, without forgetting the line or connection with the previous information that have already been processed.

What type of text is a debate? What characteristics do these texts have? In what way can we guarantee communicative efficiency and contribution to knowledge in these debates?

A debate is part of the argumentative texts, which are those that «express points of view and the will of the speakers in each situation of life in a collective. They are constantly present in trials and in the opinions that we hear around us in daily conversations. […] In the writing in a university environment it is an essential part of academic communicative skills, as they aim to focus the ability to express with rigour pertinent critical judgements» (Lluch and Nicolàs, 2015, p. 31). These texts, then, are focused on argumentation, that is, on using good reasons rigorously and with critical thinking. There is content that is presented and some reasons that are defended: what is explained and why it is done. The outline of the argumentative text is as follows (adapted from Lluch and Nicolàs, 2015, p. 33):

1) Thesis: opinion that you wish to argue relating to specific content.

2) Development: reasoned premises and argumentation of the thesis and against the antithesis. Examples can be added that serve to illustrate the thesis. Counterarguments against the thesis can also be used.

3) Conclusion: starting from the thesis proposed at the beginning and the premises formulated in the development, the thesis being defended, or criticism of it, is strengthened.

To use argumentative technique in a virtual debate, you will have to keep in mind, therefore, two key elements in all arguments:

1) The premises (Aristotle defined them as what is presented first in a syllogism) constitute the part of the argument on which all the argumentative process is based. They adopt the form of facts observed, demonstrable and concrete facts, of theoretical frames (in different fields of knowledge), of data that can be universal and which will serve to infer consequences. It is important to have the ability to identify the premises, since usually they are connected to each other.

2) The conclusions (defined by Aristotle as that which follows or is deduced from the premises) are statements that close the argumentation and in which show the logical connection with the premises. They are a summary that justifies the thesis formulated in the first phase.

> If premise A is given, then conclusion B will result.
>
> If there is a series of conclusive facts and data (A), then B will occur.

Let us look at the following example, extracted from a virtual debate in a course in digital skills:

Here we discuss the issue of how to reconcile personal and work life with work in the virtual team. I would say as mentioned in the documentary, <u>in our life we have different spaces of activity and relationship, in which we include the time we dedicate to our interests and obligations.</u>

The obligations are difficult to change, therefore, when looking for a space to work with our group, <u>the reorganization will have to come from our free time, deciding how much we want or have to devote to study.</u>

My purpose in starting a university degree was not to fully occupy my free time, but I have not always been able to comply because, depending on the subject, I could keep it limited to the time I had planned to dedicate to it, but in others I had to take advantage of every free moment to get the work done.

That is why, **in addition to the initial planning**, the work schedule and the distribution of tasks among team members, **we must be aware that it may be necessary to re-plan and rethink the agreements** to adapt them to the evolution that is taking place. the group and the unforeseen events that may arise.
The fact of being teamwork and, in addition, virtual, adds difficulty to this point. It is easy to modify the schedules that you have thought for others, **but in the case of a group, nothing can be done unilaterally, you have to count on the opinion of others.**

[The premises are marked in <u>underlining</u> and the conclusions in **bold**.]

It can be very useful to use various typographical resources to highlight the elements of an argumentative text, which is why we have opted to **underline** the premises and use **boldface** in the conclusions. In the text, observe that they are debating on how to find a balance between the personal and work life with UOC team work. The first premise makes reference to data on the experience of the student («in our life we have different spaces of activity and of relationships, where we include the time that we devote to our interests and

obligations») and the second, related with the first, puts emphasis on the fact that the reorganisation of work in a virtual team will have to be done taking into account the free time and deciding what part of that will be allocated to it. As a conclusion for that previously formulated, the student indicates the necessary **replanning of the agreements** and the need to **count on the others to reach a good port in the group planning**.

The argument, in general, can be accepted with new data and evidence (you can mention sources consulted, for example) or to be responded to and discussed, in which case we are faced with **a counterargument** or argument that is used against one that has been made previously, attacking the main thesis and its depiction in the conclusion.

In the following example we see a counterargument that argues the thesis that it is necessary to continue in a process to choose a leader or coordinator for the work team:

> In relation with the other recurring topic of debate, that of leadership, I think, as do many of you, that it is a key aspect of collaborative work. Even so, **I do not think that it is necessary to go around and around on how to choose the leader, be it virtual or face-to-face, since this figure appears spontaneously and, when they do so, everyone recognises it without the need to label it as such**. For me it is good that there are leaders because they help the good functioning of the team, and I think that there can be more than one, but I also think that each member of the group has a notable role beyond that of the coordinator, and if one looks carefully, they can observe that all the contributions are usually special and useful, in their own way, in the achievement of the final objective.
>
> [In bold , the counterargument]
>
> *Intervention of a UOC student in a virtual debate*

The student's comment makes reference to other previous messages that insisted on the processes that had to be carried out to choose the leader of the work team: she thinks that the figure of the leader emerges spontaneously out of the group work process and that, consequently, it is necessary to propose mechanisms for their election. Then she clarifies her argument by pointing out that, although leadership is relevant, each participant brings quality to the different tasks, beyond the figure that appears to lead the team.

We observe that the counterargument does not discuss the main thesis of the discussion, the importance of leadership in collaborative projects, but the way in which such leadership is legitimised and exercised.

In any text there are three aspects that contribute to its communicative efficiency and we cannot lose sight of them in virtual debates:

1) Adaptation: the text must be adjusted to the communicative situation (the discussion around a topic, document, or case); a formal record should be used, avoiding spelling mistakes and errors of expression or misuse of punctuation

marks; the paragraphs must be separated appropriately and, as we have previously indicated, the premises and conclusion typographically marked as distinct.

2) Coherence: the text has to follow an argumentative thread, start from an introduction, develop logically, and reach conclusions that derive from the premises. It should be adjusted to what the participants in the debate know, be the result of a process of information selection, and be very organized. An intervention without coherence does not contribute anything, so it is advisable to make a preliminary outline of the ideas before writing.

3) Cohesion: the text is formed by different sentences or statements that are related to each other through a series of mechanisms, such as repetition, synonymic substitution, pronominalization and, above all, textual markers and connectors. These mechanisms will allow our readers to understand the text in its entirety.

> **Textual markers and the connectors**
>
> To build a cohesive text it is necessary to make use of textual markers and connectors: the first classify the information, introduce the topics, and mark the order of the narrative, whereas the second connect the paragraphs and the sentences of the text.
>
> Examples of textual markers: *in the first place, secondly, regarding X, in addition, on the one hand, for example, in summary, in conclusion, to finish…*
>
> Examples of connectors: *since, because, thanks to, thus, therefore, with the aim of, nevertheless, although…*

A last characteristic to mention is the conclusion: our text cannot finish in just any way, but must close with our conclusions:

> «The linguistic text is subjected to the inexorable law of time. It has a length and, therefore, a beginning, a development, and an end or conclusion. In the same way that it is not suitable to write "acephalous" texts, without a title, header, or initial comment, neither is it recommended that the texts end in just any way, through tiredness or the inexperience of the person who wrote them. It is necessary, then, to look for a textual closure, the closing of the circle of the writing.»
>
> Lluch And Nicolàs (2015, pág. 36).

Only in this way will our contributions to the debate be persuasively effective texts, with good arguments that can be a vehicle for learning in a virtual environment.

2.2. Formal rules of participation

Once the characteristics of the argumentative texts have been analyzed and having studied how the argumentative techniques can be applied, we now present the formal norms of participation in virtual debates. These, undoubtedly, will be very useful to you for preparing the various interventions and for

the debate to be an ordered whole and not a simple succession of messages. These guidelines will help the collaborating teaching staff follow the debate, and will be evaluable elements.

We can divide these formal rules of participation into different groups:

1) Regarding the form of the messages:

- **It is key to always indicate the topic or subject of the message**: this allows a better organisation of the comments according to the subject that is being dealt with. Leaving the subject empty can be interpreted as a sign of neglect and does not help us to participate with a good attitude. If the message is a response to another, we can choose to leave it the same (for example, *RE: Shared leadership*) or modify it in function of the nuances that we have incorporated.

- **Include a greeting and signature in the messages**: they are indispensable norms of courtesy in a formal context. On one hand, the greeting introduces us in the message and the signature closes it, indicating that it is finished. Not to include them makes one think of a certain neglect in the presentation of our argument.

  Example of a message without greeting or signature

  Personally, I think that the most important attitude is to always be optimistic. Sometimes the technology perhaps can seem complicated, but it is important to have an open mind and, especially, patience. Negativism only leads to more problems.

  Likewise, when working in a group you have to be very organised, realistic, and empathic. Organisation and order are fundamental for a team project to go well. If there is no organisation and, on the contrary, we opt for improvisation, we won´t accomplish much. To this equation we also have to add communication. Organisation and communication, definitely, go hand in hand.

  In summary, a positive attitude is key in any aspect of our lives, but if we speak of CIT, we also have to add patience and constancy. And to work as part of a team, especially order and communication!

  Intervention of a UOC student in a virtual debate

- **Every message has to be focused on one idea or subject**: we mustn´t get obsessed with including all the ideas of the debate in a single message; rather, it is fundamental that we focus on the idea that we want to argue or counterargue, or on responding to a previous reflection.

- **The messages should not be either too short nor too long**: you have to avoid messages that simply are an assent to a previous opinion, since they do not contribute anything to the discussion. On the other hand, excessively long messages do not help to focus the arguments, and involve a loss of spontaneity.

- **Use a suitable register**, using specific terminology, but without being too formal. Even so, you should never use special slang nor bad language. The discussion can be enriched with examples and experiences.

- **Highlight the premises and the conclusion with underlining and bold-face**: it helps us to centre our attention on the relevant terms of the message. Also it is essential to indicate the titles of monographs in italics and insert images only when necessary. You must avoid attaching documents if they are not elements that will help with the understanding of the argument, since filling the messages with attachments contributes to a loss of dynamism, and in no case will interventions be made in this type of document.

- **Respect the correct order and dynamics of the conversation threads**: when we make contributions that refer to previous arguments, we should not open a new thread, but instead respond to the one already open. At all times you must respond to the correct message. We will explain below in detail how this special configuration of virtual debates works.

2) Regarding the content of messages:

- **Employ argumentative techniques and centre it always on the ideas and opinions of the participants**: we must never incur *ad hominem* fallacies, that is, we must never attack or disqualify the person, but only the arguments used. Therefore, we must be especially careful and maintain an attitude of respect and tolerance. In virtual environments it is very easy to have misunderstandings, so it is very advisable to avoid irony.

- **Give strength to the arguments** with references external to the debate, extracted from different sources (well cited), with the possibility to link to them. If fragments of the quoted authors are used, indicate the authorship and make clear the parts of the message that are your own or are citaciones. Using references offers more richness to our contributions.

- **Use the concepts of the debate precisely and correctly**, do not get lost in subjects that do not have anything to do with the central content.

- **Publish the message in the specific folder that refers to the content being discussed**: virtual debates often become divided into different areas of focus via specific folders; therefore, it is necessary to make sure our message goes to the folder that corresponds with the concepts being discussed since, if not, it could cause confusion.

Example of a message with a link to a specific reference

Good morning everyone!

In **an article** in the *Harvard Business Review* they speak of the **effect and impact that positive teams have on productivity** and base their theory on different points that

must be dealt with in teams. Some points are of a **very American** mentality (they are the indisputable leaders in **theories of leadership and motivation**). We remember that sentence of President JFK that said: «Do not ask you what America can do for you, ask what you can do for America.»

According to the article, for teams to have positive attitudes and, in addition, favour productivity they have to:

- **Maintain the interest** of the rest of the team members.

- Provide **mutual support**, including offering **kindness** and compassion when others are struggling (with the work).

- Avoid blame and forgive **errors**.

- **Inspire** the others for the work to be done.

- Put emphasis on **the meaning** of the **work done**. Treat the others with **respect, gratitude, confidence, and integrity**.

You can consult the article at: https://hbr.org/2015/03/positive-teams-are-more-productive

I hope that it will be of interest.

Regards!

Intervention of a UOC student in a virtual debate

3) Regarding interactions:

- **Prepare the debate** by reading the already published comments, taking notes of the ideas that have appeared and noting the authors in case you have to refer to them. Knowing the previous comments is important for avoiding repetition.

- **Attribute the arguments to the students who have published them**: it is recommended to mention the classmates alluded to and mention if you agree or not with their reflections. We can quote some of their fragments to add to the discussion.

- **Include your comments in a coherent manner** in the development of the debate starting from the contributions of classmates and following the indications of the collaborating professor, who acts as moderator. To maintain this coherence you have to be aware of the conversation threads and decide if you have to open a new one or respond to the one which is already open.

- **Do not get obsessed with making a lot of comments**, but stick to the number established by the collaborating professor. Quality is always better than quantity. It is not necessary to respond to all the references, but only to those which you judge to be more pertinent: it can be useful to group the references into a single message.

- **Respond within a short period of time** if you have to take sides for or against of the ideas presented by other classmates.

Example of message with references

Hello everyone:
I'm very much in agreement with Pere´s proposal. I think that it is a practical approach and directed at our challenge, which is to learn to work as a team in a virtual environment.

We can evaluate our capacity for commitment, **perseverance, and humility if we have to recognize that we need help from colleagues.** We will test our ability **to organize and establish agreements that can be accepted by all and that benefit the project,** and to meet the challenge of being agile **and dynamic to finish the proposed work on time.**

I also believe, as Maria says, that the figure **of the coordinator / spokesperson is important.** It is one more task that will have to be distributed, for which one must have certain organizational and leadership skills. That's why I think it's the most delicate to assign if it does not come out spontaneously within the group. At least, it will be something that I want to see how it emerges when we make the groups.

Let's keep talking.

Intervention by a UOC student in a virtual debate.

4) Regarding the dynamics of the debate:

- **Go daily (or almost) to the *Debate* space of the classroom to read the messages**: the collaborating professor will mark the duration of the debate and, therefore, an intensive follow-up during the process must be carried out. This strategy is very positive, given that it allows us to avoid the accumulation of messages to read and will facilitate collaborative learning. As we mentioned above, we will have to prepare our comments by reading the previous ones, especially those that are part of the folder in which we have to participate or the conversation thread to which we want to respond.

- **Take part in a constant way, both in the development and in the conclusions of the debate**: In the statement of the activity, the number of messages to be made will be noted (between three and six comments is an appropriate number) and it will also be indicated that they shouldn´t be concentrated in a few days. If we do all of them at the beginning, it can be interpreted as a simple procedure and, if all are carried out at the end, it can be understood as an absence of participation during the previous days. Consequently, it is best to space them out in time: they will surely be much richer, since they will pick up the different phases.

- **Schedule your interventions**: it can be a good idea to space them out, although the dynamics of the discussion might change our plans.

- **Read the indications that the collaborating professor adds during the debate**: this will allow us to improve our participation based on his/her advice. These indications can appear in the classroom Board and also in the debate folders themselves.

Example of message of the collaborating professor in the classroom Board

Hello again:
I wanted to clarify some things about the debate in which you are participating:

1. The messages should go to the folder corresponding to the question, not to the **Inbox** or to the **Discussion**.

2. We must comply with the rules of virtual communication in this type of message.

3. You always have to include a greeting and final signature.

4. We can not post a message without a subject. And the subject must be related to the content.

5. To maintain the spontaneity you should not send attachments.

6. If we respond to what a partner has said, it is not necessary to open a new conversation thread, just publish it in response to their message (in tree form).

7. Separate paragraphs and avoid spelling and grammatical errors.

8. It is better not to send two or three interventions in a row, but to space them over time. Otherwise, it gives the impression of fulfilling a procedure and not following the development of the discussion.

9. It is advisable to **highlight or indicate in bold the important concepts** (premises, conclusion, arguments ...), following the argumentative technique.

10. From now on, I will mark with green color those notable positive interventions and in red those that have some problem or formal aspect of those mentioned above. Those where nothing is marked can be interpreted as correct, nothing more.
The deadline to submit all comments is **next March 6** at night. The Conclusions folder, which I have just opened, is useful for those who have already made their interventions to put a last message in the form of a recap.

Good job! Keep it up!

As a conclusion to this section, it is highly advisable that the degree of reflection throughout the debate be constant and typical of university students, that we have initiative when proposing new reflections and contributing new elements to the discussion, without constantly repeating what has already been sufficiently developed.

2.3. Debate etiquette

In the processes of communication online it is very important to know the norms of behaviour and the digital attitude to be followed, since in this virtual environment we have to coexist and interact. Debate constitutes an environment of this type and is not exempt from said norms of behaviour. The values that you have to respect are framed in a code of digital culture, in accordance with the following table (adapted from Aced, 2013):

Honesty	Never lie, be transparent. It is better to not give data than to give a false one.
Trust	Earn the trust of your classmates so as to establish effective communication and relations.
Solidarity	As the social web is a collaborative environment, we have to be willing not only to receive, but to give something in return.
Gratitude	Giving thanks for a comment or for having shared one of yours will help to create community.
Respect	Everyone has a right to make constructive criticism, but in a respectful and tolerant way.
Humility	We have to be humble and accept that the contributions of the other people enrich our points of view and help us improve.

Flexibility	It is necessary to have a mentality that is open to change.
Common sense	Common sense has to guide our participation in the debate, since we should not do online what we would not do offline.

In the UOC debates, which are asynchronous forums, these values are very present: in our interventions we must be honest, offer contrasted information and build trust through the arguments used, even if they attack some of the positions we have defended previously. The important thing, without a doubt, is respect and tolerance: we should not be afraid of criticism, as long as it is based on a scrupulous respect for the other's positions, and we have to show social skills, giving thanks when necessary or evaluating positively the contributions of our colleagues. Common sense must be present: a virtual debate has to be as sincere and spontaneous as a face-to-face one. The fact that we are not face-to-face should not make us think about the impunity of our approaches: we show ourselves to others in the same way and we are subject to the judgment of our classmates and the collaborating teaching staff. We always have to be predisposed to learn and enrich ourselves from the work of everyone: it is a collaborative environment, which allows the work of the group to exceed individual contributions. We summarize it in the following graphic:

· ATTITUDES IN THE DEBATE ·

Honesty

In our comments we must offer corroborated information.

01

02

Trust

We must generate trust with the arguments we use.

Respect and tolerance

We must not fear criticism, as long as it is based in respect for the positions of the others.

03

04

Social skills

Thank people when necessary and value your colleagues' contributions positively.

Common sense

The virtual debate has to be as sincere and spontaneous as a face-to-face debate.

05

06

Willingness to learn

We must be willing to learn from and enrich ourselves with the work of everyone.

Example of message of gratitude

Good afternoon:
I´ve done the test that Nuria shared. It´s really interesting and it´s very quick to do, even though it´s 240 questions.

My results were:

1. Love for learning.

2. Impartiality, even-handedness, and justice.

3. Curiosity and interest in the world.

4. Bravery and courage.

5. Social intelligence.

Let´s see if more people try it...it´s a great way to get to know each other a little!

Thanks for the test, Nuria!

Intervention of a UOC student in a virtual debate

In this framework it is necessary to observe the rules of etiquette. This word (which in several languages incorporates an "n" in front, *netiquette*, from the English *network* and the French *etiquette*) designates the set of rules of polite behaviour used for communication online. They come from an adaptation of those used in the offline world. The ten rules of Virginia Shea (1994), from her book *Netiquette*, are famous. In these rules is an explicit recommendation to follow common sense to avoid the misunderstandings typical of online conversations. You have to make an effort towards empathy and clarity, with proper language and attention to the style. As we said earlier, irony is not recommended, but rather the referential function and a preferably denotative language must be insisted upon. In a virtual debate we must clearly say what is intended, without getting lost in vagueness. These norms also affect the adaptation of the message to the characteristics of the medium. We know that it is necessary to focus on the contents and the specific terminology of the debate topic based on an article or reference case. We should not change the subject and we must use an appropriate register typical of a university context. It is also not appropriate to introduce informational noise, repeating many times what has already been commented: remembering rule 4 ("Respect the time and bandwidth of other people"), we must be sure to provide relevant content so as to avoid wasting the others' time. These standards also emphasize the need to contrast sources and write correctly. Although a debate can be a place to defend opinions passionately, we must be aware that there will be people who will not share our points of view.

In summary, it is necessary to respect these rules so as to avoid problems in the debate and to guarantee a good digital attitude: only in this way will we be able to generate collective intelligence by means of the collaborative construction of knowledge.

The ten rules of Virginia Shea

Virginia Shea (1994). *Netiquette*: http://www.albion.com/bookneti-quette/

3. Stages of a virtual debate

In a virtual debate a series of stages (preparation, development, and conclusions with closing) can be distinguished in which different resources can be employed. They count on the presence of the students as active protagonists in the learning process, and of the collaborating professor in the role of moderator.

3.1. Preparation

Before beginning the debate, the collaborating professor will present the activity, making reference to the document where the general outlines are defined (usually the PEC statement), to the case under analysis (which may appear as textual or audiovisual support) and the debate guide (which specifies the key points to work on during the discussion). Therefore, before commenting it is very important to read carefully these orientations, the complementary materials, the case behind the debate, and the guide.

In the discussion guide, the teacher will outline the objectives of the activity, present the document, the requirements for the comments (minimum and maximum number of messages, folders in which to participate, main topical threads, content to be developed, etc.) and other specific recommendations. The purpose of the different lines of discussion is that, in the marked period, conversation threads are opened that will try to respond to each one of the questions asked. The messages will be sent to the *Debate* space of the classroom (in one of the phases of the timeline of the course) and to the folders proposed by the collaborating teacher.

Each one of the folders focuses on a specific aspect and the collaborating professor can restrict the number of messages and folders where the students will have to participate.

Specifically, the collaborating professor is the **moderator of the debate** and can exercise these functions in various ways, in accordance with their style:

- They can make interventions that have to do with the content of the debate, synthesizing some aspects discussed or summarizing them. They can do this in the root folder (at a generic level) or in any of the topical folders.

- They can employ coloured marks to indicate compliance or non-compliance with some of the rules of the debate, whose meaning will have been previously explained.

- They can enter coloured notes to make some specific comment to a student.

- They can edit the presentation space of the *Debate* space to introduce a diagram or to remind about the time limits.

In any case, the collaborating professor will inform about the tools that will be used during the debate.

In summary, before starting to participate in the debate, it is necessary to have read the reference documents and the indications that have been offered on the Board. Students must be respectful of the participation procedure and the formal rules, as well as the argumentative technique and the linguistic requirements.

3.2. Development

The debate develops, as we have already pointed out, in the corresponding space of the classroom and within the terms that has been determined in the teaching plan or the statement of the PEC. Before commenting, it is highly recommended to follow the following outline:

1) Online, read the comments to date from your classmates (it is important not to begin too late, as we have already noted).

2) Take note of the contributions that you find most interesting.

3) Choose the folder or the conversation thread in which you want to participate.

4) Determine if you will respond to some already open thread or if you will propose a new idea, that is, if you will publish the message as a response or will open a new conversation.

5) Prepare the comment offline with the text processor, reviewing the contents of the reference document and looking for complementary information.

6) Correct the spelling and expressions.

7) Copy and paste the text into the debate message, edit it in enriched format and typographically highlight the premises and the conclusion, as well as any possible sources consulted.

8) Publish it, ensuring that it is found in the folder chosen or in the correct thread.

During the debate, according to what we have said above, it is pertinent to know if we have to create a new conversation thread or we have to respond to one that has been created before. This will depend on whether we are making a contribution with new ideas that have not appeared or if we want to discuss or respond to an idea that has already been proposed.

Now then, what are conversation threads? This is the tree format of the messages that are structured around the same topic. This means that the messages, in this configuration, are not displayed according to the publication date, but by the topic to which they respond. What is interesting, then, is not the simple chronological order of the comments, but their belonging to a specific discussion.

We can see that the response messages include the same subject, which means that they discuss aspects raised in the initial message.

What are the recommendations for making good use of the conversation threads?

1) Avoid starting new conversation threads for any question that has already been proposed in a previous thread; therefore, we must also avoid starting conversation threads with the same subject. Repeating the topics makes you lose spontaneity in the debate.

2) If a contribution is made that refers to a previous message, it is enough to respond to the message (*RE: Positive attitudes*, for example): this will allow for ordering the comments on the same topic in the form of a tree. It will not be necessary to copy the original message, as it is reiterative.

3) Avoid complicating the conversation thread tree with answers to responses. It is always better to respond to the main message. If we press the symbol *(+)* we open the conversation thread, while with the symbol *(-)* we close it and only the initial message is displayed.

4) If we want to see the chronological order of the messages, we can do so by listing them with the option **Read all,** although it is unnecessary if we want to follow the discussion thematically.

5) Do not obsess over opening new conversation threads: our contributions can be equally brilliant if we make them as responses to those already initiated.

6) Do not include subjects extraneous to the topic of the debate.

The first thing that we will do is to choose and open the folder in which we want to comment, supposing that the collaborating professor has distributed topical folders.

Next, the process will be as follows:

1) Click on *New message* only if you want to make an original contribution in a new conversation thread.

2) To follow a conversation thread already started, select the corresponding message and use the *Reply*button.

3) To open a message in a new window, select it and press the button *Open.*

4) Usually we will not use the option *Respond to sender, since* we would send the message to the person that has sent it and the rest of participants in the debate could not see it. Neither would we typically use the option *Re-send,* which is for sending a message to some other user without it being published in the debate.

5) It can be useful, to see all the messages and have the option to download them to our computer, to press the *Read all button:* the result is a list with all the messages ordered chronologically.

6) The *History* option offers us information on which people have read a specific message and at what date and time they have done so.

The explanation of how the debate is organized is very explicit in the **debate guide**. Throughout the term established, the comments will be prepared and published in a spaced manner, since in this way the student will continuously monitor and may be attentive to the messages from the moderator and the different topics as they develop.

3.3. Conclusions and closing

The last days of the debate, once the comments in the conversation threads have been made, will be dedicated to the conclusions, which will be placed in a specific folder created by the collaborating professor. These conclusions, as a synthesis, will incorporate specific aspects of topics that have been discussed that have been especially relevant throughout the debate. In this folder you can focus on the thread you have worked on, but you can also refer to other more generic issues, since it is a recap. It is highly recommended to participate in this conclusions folder as the closing of the entire discussion process.

Example of message in the *Conclusions folder*

Good morning everyone,

I would like to share with you my final reflection on the issues that have been discussed throughout this debate. In my opinion, the key points to achieve success in a team project in virtual environments are:

1) Give the best of yourself. Maintain a positive attitude, motivation, **responsibility**, self-demand, organization, perseverance ... for your own commitments, and also towards others, offering respectful treatment and mutual trust.

2) Make the most of each member of the group. We must take advantage of diversity as a source of wealth, both for knowledge (by age, training, experience) and personal skills and abilities, **to assign the most appropriate tasks for each.**

You have to value the contributions of each member and communicate with respect and empathy. Different opinions, which when poorly communicated could generate conflicts, make us more critical, rethink certain issues, and broaden the field of vision. In times of crisis, remember what unites us more than what separates us: the common goal.

3) Take advantage of the resources offered by technology to **plan** and organize tasks, communicate, readjust, revise ... and thus bridge the distances and differences in availability of each component of the team. Leaving a written record of the work done will help us to remember the rules and **respect the deadlines** set.

Thanks to everyone for your contributions, which help us to grow.

Regards.

Intervention by a UOC student in a virtual debate

We can see in this example that it is not a very extensive intervention, in which the student enumerates what the points are that stand out in the debate that is about to end. He/she lists them conveniently and highlights the most important with underlining and boldface. It is also an exercise in tolerance that includes a final thank you.

In this final part of the debate, it is not necessary to follow the same structure of the conversation threads, since each student provides a personal summary of what he or she has worked on. The collaborating professor will announce the conclusion of the debate through a message in one of the classroom spaces (which can be the *Board* or the *Debate* itself) and can enrich it with his/her own synthesis.

4. The evaluation of the debate

Once the debate is over, the evaluation process begins, in which the collaborating professor has to assess the fulfillment of the different indications that were offered in the classroom spaces and in the debate guide. This evaluation must take into account a series of aspects, which we summarize in the following points:

1) The number of interventions required in the designated timeframe.

2) The spacing of these interventions over time.

3) The publication of the comments in the correct thematic folder.

4) The suitable length of the messages.

5) Whether the formal rules of participation were followed with regard to the subject of the messages, the greeting, and the signature.

6) The use of a linguistic register suitable to the university environment.

7) The style and spelling.

8) The applicability, coherence, and the cohesion of the messages.

9) The references to the sources consulted.

10) The respect and tolerance in the tone of the comments; therefore, the civic attitude in a virtual environment.

11) The ability to introduce new ideas in the course of the discussion.

12) The ability to respond with arguments to the ideas proposed by classmates.

13) The proper use of the conversation threads.

14) The proper use of the argumentative technique, with diverse typographical treatment for the premises and the conclusion.

15) The publication of the summary of the debate in the conclusions folder.

In function of these items, it can be determined, as **orientative criteria**, what would be correct, good, or excellent participation, in such a way that the excellent participation would have to incorporate all the positive elements of the previous list:

Correct participation:

- The messages include a subject that makes reference to the content of the message. They also incorporate a greeting and signature.
- They are clear and concise.
- The linguistic register is suitable.
- The messages are respectful and tolerant and refer to the topics of the debate.
- The argumentative technique is not always used and, therefore, some elements are not highlighted with the typography.
- The messages are not simple repetitions of other previous comments, but introduce few new elements.
- The messages are not always spaced out over time.
- The degree of reflection is suitable for a university environment.
- The conversation threads are not always employed properly.

Good participation:

- They show that a reading of all the messages has been done in the folder in which they have participated .
- The argumentative technique has been used, highlighting some elements with typographic elements.
- The messages are coherent with the previous comments and contribute new elements in a substantial way.
- The messages have been spaced properly over time, which shows constant follow-up throughout the debate.
- A correct use of the conversation threads is seen, both at the moment of proposing new ideas and in responding to those formulated previously.

Excellent participation:

- There are external references in the messages (citaciones or links to the sources consulted) coherent with the debate topic.
- Initiative is shown with regards to the contribution of new ideas to the debate.
- A well argued summary is incorporated in the conclusions folder, in addition to the messages published in the other folders.
- They respond to the previous interventions in a suitable timeframe.

As for incorrect participation, it would be that which does not comply with the elements of the correct participation regarding the form, content, interaction, follow-up, or the degree of novelty and originality of the comments.

As we have mentioned above, the fulfillment of these aspects will allow us to achieve the fundamental competence that is worked on throughout the debate: **Acquire communication skills in a virtual learning environment**. This ability is very relevant for our studies at the UOC and, currently, it is also important for our virtual interactions in our personal and professional lives: it offers us tools of communication and collaboration that, at the same time, allow us to become digital citizens.

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