

Online Discussions

I'll draw on my own online discussion experiences. Perhaps something of what I write will be helpful, as far as comments made on the website. Here, then, is what I have learned . . .

1. **Respect** – I think it's vitally important to be *courteous* and *respectful* at all times; respectful of one another, and of anyone we might mention. If we feel any negative emotion arising, it's probably better to wait before posting.

2. **Writing** – A part of respect, I feel, is to write in a reasonably decent and coherent manner. I recall one situation where a person wrote without capitalization, inadequate punctuation, poor sentence structure, and misspellings. It was simply not pleasant to read their comments.

3. **Global awareness** – The beauty of a website is that it draws people globally. With that, there will be diversity of cultural background. As a result, comments that are acceptable in one culture might be interpreted as unfriendly or even confrontational in another. The solution: To always err on the side of graciousness. Don't let cultural differences spoil communication.

4. **Disagreeing agreeably** – It's good to emphasize that one's disagreements are intended respectfully. One way of doing this can be to praise a good point, as one kindly takes issue with another point.

5. **Seeking to understand** – I have learnt that I need to make sure I understand the *intent* behind a comment before I critique it. This might mean to politely ask for clarification before I respond. (This can actually save time because the person may have held a different position than I had thought!) One educator noted that by helping others sharpen their comments, participants are doing a service for each other and the quality of the website.

These are lessons I have learnt from online discussion experiences, shared in a spirit of edification. (I am also indebted to Robert Wright from Princeton University's religion department who conducted an online course I briefly participated in.)

Thanks everyone, and I'm looking forward to enjoying any conversations we may have!

Alex

P.S. These observations are dedicated to a former colleague, Mark. Together we had joined an online course. One by one, most the lessons I learnt, and have listed, were violated. Mark had such an enthusiastic and dedicated attitude when we began the course. To me, his posts were outstanding in content and demeanour. However, as the days and weeks slipped by, I was saddened that his morale (and that of the group) plummeted. Course participants were dropping off the list at a concerning rate. In the end, Mark left as well.