Online Golden Rule: Write unto others as we would have them write unto us!

Ruth Barton Jan 17, 2015 3:03 PM 🖊️

"To know someone here or there with whom you can feel there is understanding, in spite of distances or thoughts expressed, can make of this earth a garden." Goethe (1) said this beautiful thing about community, which can also apply to an online community. We create an online garden, or safe haven, when we follow the Golden Rule as we do in life: Do unto others as we wish others to do unto us. And because we're working online and primarily with the written word, its corollary is: Write unto others as we would have them write unto us!

The Golden Rule is essential to all of the world's major religions and the foundation of emotional intelligence, or understanding, or empathy. And, as we're all aware, empathy can be the missing "link" in online communication, which in our case is writing. Emotionally intelligent writing is a highly important component of online learning because it can replace the link that is missing in a community full of people who are presumably alone at their computers instead of physically together. As Palloff and Pratt refer to it, online learning is "a flat medium," a place where "we need to make an extra effort to humanize the environment" (2).

David Thornburg, in his Campfires in Cyberspace (2001), agrees:

This blessing is, unfortunately, also telecomputing's curse. When we have a peer-to-peer chat on any subject we wish, this interaction lacks the richness of face-to-face meetings. It is fine for topics of the intellect, but lousy for affairs of the heart. One cannot shake hands, smile, or hug through the medium of telecomputing — yet. (3)

Fascinatingly, although I have not confirmed the following, Gloria Steinem reported on MSNBC TV that there is a physiological explanation of why the online environment can be so lacking in empathy:

STEINEM: And the same thing is true of that and this computerized media, because you don' t manufacture Oxytocin. . . . We have some idea of how the other person is feeling, it's not just . . . empathy -- it' s produced by Oxytocin, which is not produced on the screen or on paper. You have to be together. So people are free to be more critical online. (4)

Palloff and Pratt say that "the ability to deal with emotional issues in textual form" is crucial to creating our online persona, or identity (5). Making the extra effort to address emotions in text, or write empathically, creates a strong and safe online community. We give each other cyber hugs and cyber smiles and cyber handshakes in all of our communications. We take great care to write not only to be understood, but "so that [we] cannot possibly be misunderstood." - Robert Louis Stephenson (6).

I think most of us are on the same online page. As Brandy posted on January 11: "The rule that I would propose is that we do not type anything to another person that we would not say verbally in person." Alison said on January 10, "As we work together in this online community environment let's lift each other up and make each other better." And Jessica posted on the same day, "Think best intentions, as we engage each other."

So, as we desire happiness and safety in our online community, we write with empathy – or

care, or emotional intelligence (I call it "wrempathy" 8-)!). The beauty of online learning is, we can use it to become better writers, better online collaborators, and more empathic humans!

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(1) Goethe, in Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace, by Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt)

(2) Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching, 2nd ed., Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, Jossey-Bass

(3) http://homepages.dcc.ufmg.br/~angelo/webquests/metaforas_imagens/Campifires.pdf

(4) http://www.nbcnews.com/id/56329798/ns/msnbc-all_in_with_chris_hayes/t/all-chris-hayes-tuesday-october-th/#.VLXrdyvF_T8

(5) Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace, by Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt

(6) https://terriblywrite.wordpress.com/quotations-about-writing-and-editing/more-quotations-about-writing-and-editing/