



MELBOURNE CSHE TEACHING AND LEARNING SHORT GUIDE SERIES

SEVEN WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN YOUR SUBJECT

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You don't have to look far for clear and sound learning principles that are used as the foundation for online learning program development. For example, subjects in the University of Melbourne's School of Professional and Continuous Education (MSPACE) are underpinned by core principles that provide excellent advice for those teaching and learning online which include

- > Promote deep engagement and learning
- > Foster interaction and feedback
- > Provide a high level of student support
- > Develop a virtual scholarly community
- > Ensure connection with world experts

But a question that remains for many staff is how to realise such principles specifically. How can you create learning activities and tasks, or modify existing tasks, to support these more general ambitions for high quality online learning? This document provides some advice to respond to this in the form of seven specific ways to improve online learning in your subject. The focus is on providing ways in which you can, relatively easily and simply, increase the participation and engagement of students in your existing online subject. Increasing students' engagement and interaction has been shown to increase students' learning outcomes and appreciation of the subject.

The ease with which each of the areas below can be applied will differ depending on the nature of the individual subject in terms of its design, the numbers of students involved, and their level or

experience. But equally, modest modifications to the way in which you approach online learning as a teacher, and how you provide online learning tasks for your students, can really improve the teaching and learning experience of both you and your students.

1. Get the basics right

While perhaps an odd place to start, the things that students will often most appreciate about the delivery of your online subject and the online subject site itself are often not the things that are directly related to learning. Students regularly complain about the timeliness of communication, the lack of clarity on assessment, the quality of the audio on lecture recordings, the inability to find things on the subject site and generally not knowing what is going on. Students of course have responsibilities here, but given they are not on campus they might not have an easy way to ask you, tutors, and friends for advice which often resolves issues like "When is the first essay due?" and "What is the reading for the tutorial?"

So anything you can do to mitigate such things – what might be referred to as the basic hygiene factors of subject delivery – will be appreciated by students. Watch out for small but important technical issues – consider sound quality, don't create large files, ensure you upload files in a timely way – but also tell students what you are doing and what is going on in the subject. Err on the side of over-communication about the procedural aspects of your subject.

Every subject is different and one of the most useful ways to work out what is working and what needs tweaking is simply to ask students using the announcements in the Learning Management System (LMS). Taking on board feedback and letting students know any adjustments you have made will stand you in good stead.

2. Establish your presence ... regularly

One of the most important ways to create an engaging online learning environment for students is to ensure that you yourself are actively present in it. The educational literature refers to this as establishing “teacher presence”, and it is critical to students’ learning and their perception of the quality of the online learning experience.

While providing online lectures and other material for students is an excellent start, there are many other ways that you can make sure students feel a connection with you, other students and your subject. Here are four suggestions:

1. Make regular announcements: It seems simple but providing a regular announcement to students – try for weekly – about what is happening in the subject (and the world) builds connection and belonging.
2. Prepare a short weekly video announcement: Let students know the week’s aim/s, objectives, how the week connects to previous learning and subject outcomes, and any provide any advice around assessment progress (e.g. “By now, you should be finalising your peer feedback”).
3. Make regular contributions to the discussion forums: set up online discussions in the LMS and make sure you participate in the discussion, just as you do in a regular campus-based class. Provide encouragement, adjust misconceptions and remember to name and highlight success!
4. Establish “Virtual Office Hours” where students know you are online to respond to email or discussion board questions.

3. Generate student interaction through online discussion

One of the most common ways to provoke student engagement with your online subject is through online discussion. While it is technically very easy to set up discussion boards in the LMS, it is more difficult to make online discussions among students and teaching staff work. In part this is because they are asynchronous, which means that the conversation can become disjointed. But here are six suggestions for creating a vibrant online discussion:

1. Set your expectations of how you want students to behave and interact clearly and early in your subject. It’s also important to model these behaviours and interactions yourself, such as being concise with your posts, being respectful and encouraging friendly conversation.
2. Use discussion forums for subject-based topics, and also for more informal, introductory or general discussion.
3. Provoke discussion through clear questions, controversies, cases, scenarios, issues or problems that are related to the content of subject.
4. Make sure you participate regularly in the discussion and acknowledge students when they make valuable contributions, provide links to resources or help other students.
5. Refer explicitly to useful elements that are in other elements of your subject, such as in your digital lectures, in announcements, or in online tutorials.
6. Introduce a small percentage of the overall grade for discussion forum participation.

4. Have at least one synchronous session with students

While students can survive on digital lectures, readings and engaging in online discussion many will appreciate an online session with you in real-time (a synchronous session). It is useful to try to have at least one synchronous session in your online subject where students and staff get together in real time. This can be at the start of the subject when everyone is getting to know each other, it can be at the end of the subject where students are particularly focussed on assessment, or it can be at regular intervals across the semester.

The enrolments and curriculum structure of your subject will, to a certain extent, determine what is appropriate but a number of options are provided below:

1. **Welcome Zoom:** Introduce yourself to your students using video and audio and encourage them to do the same. Use an icebreaker like the fact we're confined to homes and show off your favourite mug, etc.
2. **Q&A Zoom:** use a Zoom Chat with your students set aside specifically for Q&A. Students can ask questions in the synchronous session or they can submit them beforehand via the LMS. Make sure you pause every so often in the Zoom Chat to allow students to ask further questions and encourage dialogue.
3. **Zoom Webinars:** Zoom Webinars allow for considerably less interactivity than Zoom Meetings but can handle synchronous classes with greater than 500 students.
4. **Summary Zoom:** Much like a Q&A Zoom, Summary Zooms allow you to check in on student progress at the end of each week and post a wrap-up of the week's key take-aways and how learning outcomes and objectives have been achieved. You might look ahead to the following week's content in light of new learning.

5. Create student engagement and interaction through polling

Excellent teachers are not just passionate about their discipline and seek to convey this to students, they are also interested in where their students "are" in relation to the material they are covering. Most teachers elicit or gauge how students are coping with the material they are presenting in a subject without really noticing it (they ask questions, they observe students faces in a classes, etc). But this can be tricky in an online environment. However, there are tools – generically called quiz or polling tools – that can help teaching staff to gauge how students are going with the material being covered in the subject and they can use this to provoke engagement.

Regardless of the way in which you ask students questions in an online subject, it is important to reflect on their responses and provide feedback on these responses into other elements of the subject (e.g. lectures, tutorials, discussions, or announcements). There are a couple of ways to ask students their opinions through quizzes or polling, and here are three:

1. A number of polling tools are available and widely used in education, and the University of Melbourne uses Poll Everywhere. You can create, collect and display responses to poll questions or activities beforehand or on-the-fly.
2. Most LMS's have their own survey tool which typically use of the same question types used in standard quizzes that are set up for students. In the University of Melbourne's LMS (Canvas) it is very simple to set up an ungraded survey (it is similar to setting up a quiz for students).
3. There are also a range of online survey tools such as Qualtrics that can easily be used to create surveys, the responses to which can be easily shared with others.

6. Provide regular advice to students ... particularly about assessment

It is a truism to say that students' engagement in study is often driven by assessment.

In online learning environments it is particularly important to provide students with advice about how the assessment for the subject is organised. It is also useful to create no-stakes or low-stakes tasks early in the teaching period for students to check their understanding of a topic or practise a skill. This provides students with important early feedback on how they are going in the subject, it can also indicate areas where teaching staff might need to provide additional support or resources.

As the semester continues students will increasingly focus on end-of-semester assessment. While assessment will differ across subjects, and some types of assessments might be familiar to students, be prepared for students to be unfamiliar with, and anxious about, fully online assessment. It is important in this context to provide clear information and support options in the lead up to assessment tasks. Below are some strategies in this area:

1. Explain clearly where students can find assessment information in their LMS subject sites.
2. Provide clear assessment task outlines.
3. Provide clear instructions on how to use the assessment technologies and learning technologies and information on where to get technical support.
4. Produce a video or run a Zoom session to discuss each assessment task as it approaches. If implementing a new or unfamiliar assessment technology, run a no-stakes rehearsal for students.
5. Help students to prepare for assessment tasks by flagging expectations of where they should be in their preparations.

6. Provide a discussion board for students to raise questions about an upcoming assessment task. Address these questions in an announcement or webinar.

See Melbourne CSHE's short guide on moving to open book exams here:

https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/3341944/closed-book-to-open-book-exam_final.pdf

7. Look at what students are doing and adjust

Finally, every so often it is useful to look across your whole online subject and reflect on what students are doing, what they are engaging in, what is hitting the mark, and perhaps what needs adjustment. Most online learning platforms, including those at the University of Melbourne, allow you to use analytics to review student progress and engagement. You can use these data to:

1. Support students by identifying those who may benefit from additional assistance or resources.
2. Gain a more general overview of strengths and weaknesses in student learning.
3. Use data to tailor communications to support learning and engagement.

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