Learning and Teaching Online (in a Hurry).

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Learning and Teaching Online: Principles

● Distance Learning works in a very different way to campus teaching. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is important to note that activities will not map like-for-like from campus to online solutions and nor should they.

● Distance Learning is no less time consuming or resource intensive than campus teaching. Teaching an online course each week takes the same amount of time out of your week as teaching a campus course, especially if you include the time for mentoring and guidance of your students. It takes the same amount of people.

● Most modules already exist on Blackboard and these can be enhanced quite quickly to make them Distance Learning ready as an interim solution.

● In addition to ourselves, most distance learning experts agree that ‘asynchronicity is your friend’. Discussion forums on Blackboard are far better replacements for classroom seminars and discussions than trying to replicate these in real time through online solutions. If we do close the university your work-life patterns will change and so will those of your students, so timing online discussions will be difficult. Your students also may not have access to the internet on demand and may lack the bandwidth or a suitable place to participate from home.

● Asynchronicity may be your friend, but time is not. There may be little time to identify and test online solutions for much of your teaching. Simplicity is the key. There is no gold-plated solution. Stick with what you know and what your students know.

● Communicate with your students about what you are doing and why. Establish email contact and set up times when you can be available for Skype chats for one-to-one mentoring. Be proactive - reach out to students who haven't logged on or don't seem to be engaging on the discussion forums to see if they are having particular problems.

● Focus on teaching not technology. Pedagogy matters more than ‘content’. We know that students learn more when they produce knowledge for themselves: reading, thinking and talking. This is the same whether they are learning at a distance or on campus.

● Online learning has benefits. Consider these rather than just what is lost by not being on campus:
  ○ For those individuals who are uncomfortable speaking in public, forums provide an opportunity to have their voices heard.
  ○ The pressure to come up with a spontaneous response is removed. Asynchronous study provides space - time to digest an article or a post by someone else. This space can allow for deeper thinking and a more meaningful exchange of views.
That feeling of walking out of a seminar and immediately thinking of the perfect response to that difficult question doesn’t happen with online forums. You can go back at any point, clarify your argument, or share your eureka moment.

Forums can also help to overcome the gendered nature of the classroom. Female students studying on campus report that seminars are often dominated by men and research supports this. Whilst certain voices can still dominate even in an online forum the physicality of a heated debate is removed.

- Research shows that students will watch, on average, 6 minutes of an online video lecture before disengaging. There is little point in recording 50-minute lectures.
- Use resources that already exist: YouTube, online databases, online archives, websites and open educational resources are your friend.
- If you need resources, ask! Twitter is a great source of information and networks. If you are not on Twitter, your colleagues are.
- Now is the time to share.
- Learning is a social activity. Encourage an online sense of community. Be present, visible and compassionate.

Converting a Campus Course to Distance Learning

- Using the existing Blackboard module we can very quickly set up templates for weekly topics and discussion forums. Most of the rest is already there.
- Each topic will need some kind of introduction. If you have lecture slides those will do. If you can add an introductory paragraph so much the better. Then direct your students to the reading for that week and devise three or four ‘guiding questions’ that they should bear in mind while they are reading.
- Each topic will then have a discussion forum. You should write a very brief introductory post and then use the guiding questions to start off the discussion.
- Ideally each assignment should also have a discussion group, where you can give guidance and where students can ask questions about that particular assignment. If it’s quicker just set up one assignment discussion group and do it all in that.

Make Roles Clear and manage expectations from the start:

For our DL modules we use this statement to try to manage expectations.

“Your role:

We expect all our students to be active and engaged with the module and to contribute to the best of their ability throughout the module. You should consider yourself as part of a learning community. As we take a social approach to learning it is particularly important that you contribute to the discussion forums. The success of our modules relies in large part on the enthusiasm and
motivation of our students. If you don’t participate you not only limit your own education, you limit that of your fellow students too. We expect you to complete all module activities on time. If you feel you are unable to complete an activity on time you should inform your Tutor or the Course Administrator before the deadline has passed.

Our role:

Your Tutor is there to guide you through the module. They should be your first point of contact if you have any questions or problems regarding the module. If you email your Tutor you can expect them to respond to your email within 2 working days.

Your Tutor is there to stimulate and encourage debate. The responsibility for participating on discussion forums however lies with the students themselves. You can expect your Tutor to make at least two announcements per week. The first will introduce you to the topic under discussion. The second will sum up the discussions that have taken place in the forum and highlight important points of analysis that have been covered that week.

Whilst your Tutor will read everything that is posted, they won’t always respond to every post. Don’t be concerned if your Tutor does not respond to your post! This is not a reflection of a lack of interest or agreement with your post on their behalf or a reflection of its quality. Instead, your Tutor will often hold off from responding to a particular post to see what your peers make of it. Distance learning works best when there is an active community of students who are learning together and reflecting upon each other’s posts. Whilst your Tutor is there to guide you and facilitate these discussions, it is important that you have a space to engage with each other as well as with them.”

Running a Distance Learning Course

The guidance below is what we give to the Associate Tutors teaching on our Distance Learning courses.

Weekly announcements.

- **Each AT must make a minimum of two announcements a week.** Please leave these in the form of Blackboard announcements rather than emails or forum posts. This way you build content on the module page that students can easily refer back to. It also makes your page look busy!

- **The first announcement** should introduce the weekly topic and any other deadlines for activities due that week. It should aim to welcome the students to the discussion forum and get the debate going. Students should not find themselves on an empty forum – yours should be the first post they see. This means you get to set the tone and get the ball rolling.

- **At the end of the week** you should sum up the discussions and remind the students of what is coming next.

- By doing these two weekly announcements, you create a narrative of the module that students can refer back to.
Forum Participation

- Student feedback routinely focuses on forum participation or a lack of it. This is something we always struggle with, but I would like us all to make forum participation a priority again this semester. As I have said before, I am a firm believer that students must take responsibility for their own education and the primary responsibility for making the forums work lies with the students themselves. There is only so much as an AT that you can do. Feel free to point this out to the students themselves. It is our job however to do what we can to facilitate engaging debate. Student feedback acknowledged how useful it was to have an active and enthusiastic Associate Tutor. Whilst I know it can be demoralising if students do not respond to you please remain active and visible on Blackboard throughout the duration of the module.

- Encourage students to be pro-active and find strategies themselves for increasing participation. Is there a particular day each week they are all able to post? Do they want to share reading between them? Do they want to take it in turns to take a lead on the forums? Each group is different - who works for yours? Feel free to try any strategy as long as it doesn’t exclude any student or create unnecessary extra work.

- There is a document on every Blackboard module detailing what we expect from our students and what they can expect from us. Please refer to it and ensure you are keeping up your side of the bargain. Please also refer your students to this.

- Please contact by email any students who are not participating on the forums. We can’t force them to participate; emails should be encouraging and supportive rather than disciplinary in tone. If you get no response contact me and I will chase them.

- If your module remains quiet after a few weeks, please contact me and we will see if we can come up with a strategy to encourage participation.

- Length of forum posts: A few students have noted in their feedback that some student forum posts are basically mini-essays. This has put them off from joining in. Any post is better than no post, but the forums should ideally be a space for conversation. Encourage students to keep their posts short and to engage with other posts. Please try to set an example by posting short comments that respond to other posts. This leads us on to...

Weaving and summarising.

- During the week your role is to respond to posts in a way that encourages the students to talk to each other rather than get into a two-way debate with you. If the forum is quiet however please don’t leave eager students with no response at all.

Running Seminars online in real time

If you have to run seminars in real time have a practice go with a colleague first so you know the technology.
• Set clear instructions and offer guidance for students via email before the session starts to manage expectations.
• Email questions or tasks ahead of time. Try to get students to do as much work as possible ‘offline’ first. Come together only to share experiences, for a sense of community and belonging.
• Ask everyone to switch off their mic unless they want to contribute.
• Ideally - team teach it. In our experience there is far too much going on for one person to manage. You are teaching, listening, watching the text comments, responding to people saying, ‘can you hear me???’ Have someone else acting as a facilitator/moderator who looks after the text comments.
• Collaborate has a ‘chat’ function. Ask the moderator to try and summarise what is being said in the chat box in case anyone’s sound drops in and out. Get students to ask questions on text rather than shout over each other. You could ask a student to take this moderator role if you can’t find a colleague to buddy up with seminars.
• Record the session. Collaborate has a ‘record’ button. This way anyone who misses it can watch it back.

HyPIR Team DL:

Helen Dexter
David Strachan-Morris
Jamie Johnston