Introduction to Online Distance Learning

This is a short guide to planning effective learning in Blackboard for online distance learning students. Research suggests that interaction, feedback and participation in a learning community are significant factors that impact on student satisfaction, achievement and retention.

Not all distance learning students have chosen to study in this way because they are highly motivated, self-directed learners. They will need the same level of support, feedback and the same sense of being ‘part of a learning community’ as your face-to-face students. Most students expect that they will interact with their tutor and other students in similar ways to face-to-face classes (Selvaggi 2016).

This guide includes suggestions for a range of online learning activities that include interaction and feedback, ways to build a learning community as well as suggestions for managing student expectations and contact time. Contact the TEL team tel@staffs.ac.uk if you would like to discuss your distance learning course in more detail.

Interaction

Most approaches to delivering distance learning highlight the importance of the creation of a 'learning community' that enables academic and social integration (Tinto 1987) as well as aiming to reduce the transactional 'distance' of distance learning (Moore 1993). Both of these can be achieved by structuring the course around opportunities for formal and informal interaction with tutors and with other students. The amount of student-student and student-tutor interaction is a significant factor in both increasing student satisfaction and retention according to a recent literature review (Croxton 2014), although they noted differences according to subject discipline.

Interaction in the online course means emails, messages, synchronous conversations and collaborative writing between peers as well as email and forum posts between the tutor and students. Interaction often includes formative and summative feedback to individuals and groups that makes clear links between the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Interaction can also include interacting with ‘content’ such as interactive multimedia materials, computer simulations, guided tutorials, and computer-marked tests and quizzes. Anderson argues that:

Deep and meaningful formal learning is supported as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student–teacher; student-student; student-content) is at a high level.

(Anderson 2003)

Contact Time

Teaching distance learning students can be time-consuming. This is partly because all the teaching materials need to be well-prepared in advance, all student guidance has to be prepared in detail, and student learning needs to be closely managed to ensure that they are on task and progressing with their learning. In addition, online interactions often include more contributions from students than face-to-face activities and students may have higher expectations for 1-1 contact than in face-to-face classes.

Plan your online activities so that they map as closely as possible to the same contact time that you would spend with face-to-face students and incorporate feedback as part of the activities in the
same way you would in class. Clarify the amount of 1-1 contact (e.g. emails) that students can expect to receive at the start of the course to manage student expectations.

Online Learning Activities
Here are some examples of online activities that offer opportunities for interaction and feedback. More suggestions for a variety of e-learning tools, pedagogic models and discipline subjects are on the Best Practice Models (Walmsley 2014) wiki and Gilly Salmon also has a number of ideas for structured e-tivities (Salmon 2002). The Community of Inquiry model (Garrison 2011) suggests that online activities should include social, cognitive and teaching presence to engage learners.

Presentation activities
- Tutor may present content as a video, webinar or in a series of slides with recorded audio commentary together with suggested activities
- Students work individually or in groups to research, create and present content.

Structured discussion activities
- Debate – tutor presents stimulus material, students work in groups to prepare a proposal to support the motion or against the motion, students present argument, students vote and review.
- Delphi – each student posts question, each student responds to one question, each student comments on a response, students reflect and review
- Jigsaw – each group assigned a task, groups research and produce response, whole class convenes to share and collate responses
- Case-based – students access cases and work individually or in groups to apply theory and share solutions

Group work activities
- Blog – groups gather and share resources, students and tutor add comments
- Wiki – groups cooperate to write and build online resource to share

Reflection activities
- Journal – individuals write reflections and share with tutor

Formative and summative assessment activities
- Online test – students complete multiple choice test with immediate feedback.
- Peer assessment - groups create and share tests. Students peer-mark responses

Problem-based learning activities
- Web quest – students complete (individually or in group) role-play activity using internet resources
- Simulation – students (individually or in group) use authentic tool or engage in virtual experience

**Digital Literacy**
Teaching and learning online requires sophisticated digital skills as well as the ability to learn new skills with confidence. Not all students have the ability to use digital tools to support their learning, so develop their skills by including activities that allow them to practice with new tools and to use familiar tools in new ways.

**Assessment and Feedback**
Hattie’s meta-analysis suggests that feedback to learners has the biggest impact on learning (Hattie 2003) and the NSS results show that students have high expectations of assessment and feedback. A range of interactions between tutors and peers that makes links to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria can raise the visibility of feedback activities. Nicol found that using technology for assessment improved attainment (Nicol 2009). Some examples of how to include online feedback that maps to a similar experience for face-to-face students include:

**Feedback during presentation activities**
Students may be invited to respond to activities/ask questions during a face-to-face lecture and will receive individual and/or group feedback. Feedback is given within the time for the lesson.

An equivalent online lecture (for example a video conference or webinar) may include individual and/or group activities and students may use software tools to poll or to answer multiple choice questions. The tutor will respond to individual activities and questions to the whole group and the software may give individual feedback on test questions. Feedback is given within the time for the lesson.

**Feedback during Discussion activities**
A classroom discussion will usually include some students contributing and feedback is given in the form of individual feedback to those who contribute and general class feedback to the group. Feedback is given within the time for the lesson. However, an equivalent online discussion, for example, may run for 5 days and students can access and contribute at any time. Tutor may be present, reading posts, commenting and giving feedback etc. at any time, but will be present online during, for example, specific 1 hour scheduled time-slot for to give some individual (perhaps randomly selected) student feedback and general class feedback to the rest. Feedback is given within the time for the lesson, and is not given after the discussion is closed (although students may continue to contribute).

**Feedback for Group activities**
A classroom group activity may include students working independently with occasional support from the tutor. The group may then feedback to the whole class and receive group feedback from the tutor. Feedback is given within the time for the lesson. However, an equivalent online group activity (for example using the discussion forum or a wiki page) may run for several days and the students work independently on the task in their group. The tutor may access at any time and support where necessary. The tutor will be online during, for example, specific 1 hour scheduled time slot to read/view each group’s task outcome and offer group feedback. Feedback is given within the time for the lesson, and is not given after the activity is complete (although students may continue to contribute).
Feedback on Individual tasks
An individual classroom activity may involve students completing a reflective journal or collating items for a portfolio. The tutor may spend a small amount of time with most students for consultation and give individual feedback during the lesson. However, an equivalent individual online activity (for example using a blog or online journal) may run for several days and the student will complete the task at their own time and pace. The tutor may access at any time and offer support where necessary. The tutor will be online during, for example, specific 1 hour scheduled time slot to read/view a selection of individual blogs etc. and offer feedback. Feedback is given within the time for the lesson, and is not given after the activity is complete (although students may continue to contribute).

Content and Multimedia
You don’t have to create all the content for your course. A wide range of OER (Open Educational Resources) are available online to use in your course. Try searching the following educational databases:

Lynda.com is a library of video-based training courses focused on software topics and business skills training. These cover everything from commonly used software such as Microsoft Office to specialised applications in areas such as photography, web applications, audio and video, as well as more general topics such as collaboration, presentations and project management. Free access to Staffordshire University staff and students

MERLOT is a curated collection of free and open online teaching, learning, and faculty development services contributed and used by an international education community. Wide variety of subject areas and resource types.

OpenLearn provides free access to over 8,000 study hours of learning materials from Open University courses, with links to its BBC broadcasts and interactive content such as expert blogs, videos and games.

Jorum This free online repository service constitutes a key part of the JISC programme to collect and share learning and teaching materials for the UK further and higher education community across all subject disciplines.

Virtual Learning Environment Layout
Plan to deliver and present your teaching to learners using a similar structure and pattern as face-to-face students. For instance, weekly lessons with clear expectations of content to be covered, reading, activities, discussions etc. as well as signposting opportunities for feedback.

For example, a weekly schedule might include some or all of the following parts:

1. Reading of book section/ article
2. Completion of short test/quiz with automatic feedback
3. Participation in small-group asynchronous task to gather and share examples/ additional cases from experience
4. Participation in whole group web/phone conference lecture with Q and A
Progress Monitoring
Set out clear expectations for student engagement and plan for ways to ensure that students participate, for example, include materials produced during online activities as resources for assessment. Use the Performance Dashboard and/or the Retention Centre tools in Blackboard to check activity levels and performance. Be pro-active in contacting students who are not active, manage and discuss student progress with colleagues.

Further Reading


Selvaggi, T., 2016. An Exploratory Study of Levels of Interaction Occurring with Graduate Students in an Online Literacy Course. *International Journal of e-Learning and Distance Education*, 31(1).
