

Supporting Students Online

Learnovate has compiled a series of guides to support Higher and Further Education lecturers and tutors. The purpose is to provide support in these challenging times to those providing teaching and assessment activities to their students through the use of digital tools and technologies.

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This report was created by Learnovate at Trinity College Dublin.

1. Context

In light of the recent COVID-19 global pandemic there has been an urgent need to move higher education teaching and learning online. Lecturers have been at varying levels of comfort with this requirement. As a leading learning technologies research centre, Learnovate has compiled a series of guides to support Trinity College Dublin lecturers and tutors. The purpose is to quickly provide support to those providing teaching and assessment activities to their students through the use of digital tools and technologies. Learnovate may well follow these publications with more comprehensive resources in the future.

Learnovate, hosted by Trinity College Dublin, is an industry-led centre of excellence for research and innovation in learning technologies.

Learnovate boasts a multidisciplinary team of specialist researchers in learning sciences, computer science, user experience and user-interface design – as well as industry experts at the forefront of e-learning and EdTech innovation.

1.1. Supporting students online

The importance of supporting students online and ensuring they still feel part of the university community and part of their course is vital in sustaining their motivation and engagement with their studies, even when not physically present in the university environment.

While there are challenges for tutors in relation to supporting students when not in the face-to-face environment, whether that be in the lecture theatre, in smaller tutorial groups or in labs, there are ways to continue to engage with students online, providing them with open communication channels and means of engagement through the online environment.

We hope you will find this information useful.

For any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact us at Learnovate.

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2. Supporting students online

2.1. What is it?

While students may not be attending lectures physically, current technology allows us to provide them with an alternate experience online; however, this brings with it its own challenges.

In many online contexts learners report feeling disconnected, and experience an isolation or social exclusion that impacts on their levels of participation, satisfaction and learning (McDonald et al., 2005). When students are used to interacting in a face-to-face environment, it can be difficult to make the switch to studying fully online, and in these situations, creating a supportive learning environment for online learners is crucial for ensuring success, promoting persistence, and avoiding drop-out (Anderson, 2008).

2.2. What it does

Supporting students through meaningful communication and collaboration with others is key to the success of the online learning experience. As stated by Jenna Gillett-Swan (2017) : 'the importance of building relationships in the online environment both between facilitator and student(s) and student/student is reinforced if seeking to facilitate group activities, as relationships are central to effective group work'.

The ideal learning environment aims to develop the learner's independence and facilitate the learning process by providing supports that are flexible, accessible, and readily available when needed (Anderson, 2008).

Providing students with regular communications from tutors and other students helps to reduce feelings of isolation, one of the major reasons for drop-out from online courses.

2.3. Why for digital?

Support for students and communication with them can easily be facilitated online using a number of tools and approaches that we outline below.

While the online environment does provide some unique challenges in this regard, current technology provides us with the tools to overcome many of these challenges and promote feelings of 'presence'.

As stated by Shea et al. (2012) 'given the electronic, social, and self-directed nature of online learning, it seems imperative that we examine learner self- and co-regulation in online environments especially as they relate to desired outcomes such as higher levels of critical and creative thinking as described in the CoI (Community of Inquiry) framework'. As online learning has a definite social and self-directed nature, encouraging interaction and collaboration is an essential part of the experience for students which we can facilitate both through synchronous and asynchronous means.

2.4. Best practices

Setting expectations up front for students on how and when they are expected to interact online is important to ensuring that all students are involved in the online learning experience and are provided with opportunities for discussion and interaction to minimise those feelings of isolation or distance.

'As students' characteristics and needs are diverse, so too are their needs for supports and services' (Anderson, 2008). Therefore, in order to fully support our students, we should try to gather information from them on how they would like to be communicated with and what they need support with.

Tailoring support to individual students is more difficult in larger class sizes; however, ensuring support and communication is personal helps the student to feel heard and therefore less distant from their course.

Simply assuming that all students can or will use all forms of technology offered to them is a mistake; some will want to use certain tools such as WhatsApp for communication with fellow students and/or tutors while others will want to keep any communication more formal through the college VLE or scheduled Blackboard Learn sessions (for example). It is a good idea, where possible, to gather this information from students in order to determine the best methods of working together and supporting students while online.

Where 1-1 synchronous support sessions are being offered to students, again it is worth allowing the student the opportunity to identify the best way for this to happen and choosing the time/day that works best for them. Obviously, it may not be possible to be completely flexible in this regard as a tutor, but allowing students a sense of autonomy over their experience helps them to feel more motivated and engaged with the course as they make their own decisions.

Collaborative tasks and activities are essential to students' engagement and motivation online, which we have addressed in another piece. While these activities are crucial to students feeling connected to each other and to the course, they are also opportunities for support, both peer-to-peer support and from tutors.

The term community of practice (CoP) was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) who defined it as “an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their community” (Ardichvili, 2008). In CoPs, less experienced members learn from interacting with more experienced members (experts) and with each other (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Promoting a community within an online learning experience helps to encourage interaction and collaboration while maintaining the sense of connection for the student to the course and to their fellow students.

2.5. Tools to help

There are a number of means of communication with students that can help them to continue to feel connected to their studies.

For example, online conferencing tools such as Skype, Google Hangout and Zoom allow for 1-1 support/communication sessions with tutors but also smaller group chats, whether formal for discussing a particular topic, or informal just in order to facilitate connections.

Similarly, tools such as Blackboard Collaborate and Blackboard Learn allow feedback to be given via voice or text chat.

Tools for asynchronous communication include Slack which can be broken out into different channels for particular purposes, as well as Microsoft Teams and Hangouts Chat.

In order to identify which technologies and tools are most suited to students, using a survey tool such as Survey Monkey to gather data is useful in order that the tool selected is the most relevant.

Also, tools such as Doodle can help with scheduling of synchronous sessions and ensuring that times and dates suit most, if not all, participants.

Collaborative activities can be facilitated using tools like wikis, Google Suite/Microsoft Teams for document sharing and real-time editing, Mural and Miro for real-time whiteboarding, among many others. While some of these tools have built in chat it can be helpful when running these sessions to host a synchronous voice/video chat in tandem to communicate with the team.

Discussion boards allow for asynchronous communication while also providing students with opportunities to ask for support or clarification on particular topics, both from fellow students and from tutors, while also allowing them to provide support themselves to others.

3. References

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