# LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE

# Engaging and motivating students

**Watch the video**
http://bit.ly/d18ac5

### Aims and overview

*Engaging students in online learning is critical for success. In this episode, we examine strategies for improving engagement and motivation in online learning environments. Issues such as effective facilitation, creating learning communities, strategies for motivating students, and encouraging and sustaining participation are discussed from a variety of viewpoints.*

Written by Simon McIntyre

**"...the notion of teacher presence in an online environment is absolutely critical."** *(Associate Professor Emma Robertson)*

**"If you share, you learn more. You get different views."** *(Student)*

**"One important thing about engineering momentum, is establishing ground rules..."** *(Chris Mitchell)*

## Strategies for motivating students and sustaining participation and engagement

To truly motivate students in their learning, it is important that in your role as a teacher, you create engaging online learning situations through careful consideration of both social interaction and pedagogical design *(refer to the episode '*Planning your online class*')*. Levels of participation can naturally ebb and flow over the duration of a class as students deal with other deadlines, work and personal commitments. However falling levels of engagement within a class usually indicate a poorly structured or irrelevant online curriculum, or can be a reflection of your own levels of engagement with the students.

### *Building initial momentum*

- *Establish clear ground rules:* Clearly state your expectations of student participation from the outset. Students may never have learnt online before, or may not have an understanding of what constitutes a satisfactory level of participation or contribution. A participation rubric that describing different standards of participation may be useful. It is also a good idea to let students know how often they can expect you to be participating, and what type of feedback they can expect along the way

- *Explain at the outset why you are using online technologies the way you are in the class:* Outline what the benefits are, and exactly how using the technology will enable students to achieve their learning outcomes. This makes the interactions transparent and gives the students confidence in that what they are doing is worthwhile, and relevant to their learning

- *Be the 'guide on the side':* Don't dominate discussions, but be available to help steer collaboration and discussion as a facilitator. It is important that students don't come to rely on you as the single source of their learning, but rather someone who guides and informs their learning

- *Acknowledge student contributions:* Students can be greatly motivated when they can see that their contributions are of relevance and interest others. Encourage students to comment on each other's contributions, and make a special effort every now and then to summarise the thread of the discussion so far, and how it relates to the larger context of the class learning outcomes. Publicly praising those amongst the group who make good contributions is a clear message that you acknowledge and value your students' conscientious efforts

- *Timely feedback is critically important:* Students value feedback on their progress. The more involved you are in giving this feedback, the more secure a student feels about their learning and the contributions they make. It is important to answer questions as quickly as possible, and to get feedback to students as soon as possible after an assessment so that they can reflect on your comments before progressing

- *Provide adequate levels of technical support:* Don't take it for granted that all students have the same level of technical competency or digital literacy. Providing adequate resources, support and promptly answering questions can help overcome difficulties or feelings of intimidation

- *For students who are not contributing satisfactorily:* If students are not participating, try contacting them privately rather than 'naming and shaming' in the larger community. See if there is any reason preventing their participation, and if you can offer any support to facilitate greater participation. Be constructive, but it is important to also remind them of the need for active participation, and outline any penalties for a continued lack of participation

### *Maintaining participation and engagement*

- *Participation must be relevant, meaningful, and an integral part of the students' learning process:* Students are busy people too. If an online activity is not directly supporting to an assessment task, or the student cannot see any useful purpose, they will usually not participate. Design all activities such that they are constructively aligned to your class learning outcomes, assessments, and online community building. For example, a useful online discussion can be used as a way of students constructing criteria with which to complete and then peer review an assessment

- *Participation can be tied to assessment:* Meaningful participation could counts towards a percentage of a student's final mark. However rather than giving a mark for participation, it is useful to define this as the value of contributions made to the learning of the class, and set clear criteria for how this will be assessed. For example, regularity of contributions, depth of analysis and synthesis of the topic, constructive criticism or reference to other students' posts, etc

- *Help students understand how to best manage their time online:* By helping students to understand that smaller but more frequent amounts of time spent online can actually help maintain momentum, participation can become more manageable and enjoyable (see the episode 'Managing your time when teaching online' for more information)

- *Deal with problems or animosity quickly and openly:* As with class, there may occasionally be misunderstandings, arguments, or even bullying amongst students. Make sure that you have procedures or policies in place for dealing with this, and that students are aware of them at the start of the class. Time is of the essence when resolving such issues, as they can quickly de-motivate students from participating

## The importance of teacher presence

Your presence as the teacher in an online learning environment is crucial. Students need to feel that the teacher is present, listening and contributing to their learning through feedback, validation of ideas, constructive criticism and class management. Consider the following:

- *Teacher presence can be achieved effectively in a variety of ways:* Leading by example, well structured lesson plans, participating in discussions, giving feedback, and responding to questions in a timely manner

- *Your presence is motivational:* If students notice your absence for an extended period of time, they may feel that you regard that their activities or contributions as unimportant. This can have a de-motivating effect which can substantially reduce levels of participation

- *Don't be afraid to show your personality online:* Allowing your own personality to show in your contributions is a good way to enable students to see you as a 'real' person rather than an entity behind a screen. This can help you become more approachable and makes it easier for students to relate and interact with you.

## Creating a learning community

Learning online has the potential to be an isolating experience if the class is not prepared and facilitated correctly. The development of an online learning community however, can help make the experience rewarding and inclusive. The strength of such a community is that students have an opportunity to share knowledge and support each other, and reflect upon their learning with peers. An active online community can also help to build communication and collaboration skills, which are becoming increasingly important in a digitally networked world, where communicating electronically is commonplace.

Because they are not bound to set classes on a campus, online communities can offer more time to explore higher levels of discussion and idea sharing, and enable each student in the class the chance to contribute to a discussion equally. Similarly, some students who may have confidence issues in a face-to-face classroom because of language issues or shyness tend to participate more because they have time to adequately compose their thoughts before making a contribution. The following points may be useful in helping you establish a learning community online:

- *Use online technologies appropriately to improve communication:* Become familiar with the online technologies students may already use in their day to day lives (such as Blogging, Twitter, Wikis etc). This will enable you to better understand the benefits and limitations, and to determine whether tapping into these existing conventions could be beneficial in developing and sustaining the community

- *Socialisation is important:* Allowing students freedom and space to build personal relationships can help improve engagement and foster the building of trust that is necessary for effective collaboration. Create places online (such as discussion threads, blogs etc) where students can talk about non-class related topics

- *An online learning community is democratic:* Everyone has a say in how the community works. Embracing this and giving the students the opportunity to collectively shape their own learning can be an effective method of increasing commitment to the group

- *Construct knowledge collectively:* Through carefully planned activities and assessments, students can share and build upon existing knowledge and skills. Designing learning activities that encourage students to interact with others is a good way to facilities this. Ice breakers where students introduce themselves and describe their interests and goals, peer review, team work, discussions etc are some examples

- *Pace the learning to keep students in sync:* The momentum of learning within the class must be kept in sync with the larger cohort of students to encourage more effective collaborative learning. This can promote a deeper exploration of concepts through collaboration, and reduce the tendency for students to simply 'tick the box' by completing a whole range of tasks quickly independent of their peers.

## Conclusion

This episode is designed to help you develop strategies to motivate and engage your students in online learning. However, it is important to realise that maintaining this is usually the result of a combination of several inter-related factors such as curriculum design, the design of assessment activities, the relevance of the chosen technology, effective class and time management, as well as your own involvement in the class. We strongly recommend that you spend time browsing other Learning to Teach Online episodes that examine with these issues in more detail. If you have any comments, suggestions or strategies of your own you would like to contribute, please log onto the Learning to Teach Online forum to offer your suggestions.

## Additional reading*

Anderson, T. (2003). Getting the Mix Right Again: An Updated and Theoretical Rationale for Interaction. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 4(2).

Brindley, J., Blaschke, L. M., & Walti, C. (2009). Creating Effective Collaborative Learning Groups in an Online Environment. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 10(3).

Irwin, C., & Berge, Z. (2006). Socialization in the Online Classroom. Journal of Instructional Science and Technology (e-JIST), 9(1).

Kennedy, G., Dalgarno, B., Gray, K., Judd, T., Waycott, J., Bennett, S., et al. (2007). The net generation are not big users of Web 2.0 technologies: Preliminary findings. Paper presented at the Ascilite Singapore 2007 Conference, Singapore.

Munoz-Organero, M., Munoz-Merino, P. J., & Kloos, C. D. (2010). Student Behavior and Interaction Patterns With an LMS as Motivation Predictors in E-Learning Settings. Education, IEEE Transactions on, 53(3), 463-470.

Paechter, M., Maier, B., & Macher, D. (2010). Students' expectations of, and experiences in e-learning: Their relation to learning achievements and course satisfaction. Computers & Education, 54(1), 222-229.

Rienties, B., Tempelaar, D., Van den Bossche, P., Gijselaers, W., & Segers, M. (2009). The role of academic motivation in Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning. Computers in Human Behavior, 25(6), 1195-1206.

Salmon, G. (2003). E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online (3 ed.): Routledge Falmer.

Watson, K., McIntyre, S., & McArthur, I. (2009). Trust and relationship building: critical skills for the future of design education in online contexts. Iridescent: Icograda Journal of Design Research, 1(1).

*Note:* Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access

## Acknowledgements

**Interview and Production:** *Simon McIntyre and Karin Watson*

**Camera and Post:** *Creative Development – L&T@UNSW*

**Edit:** *Sarah Spackman*

COFA Online would like to extend a special thank you to the students, academics and institutions who generously donated their time and expertise to this episode:

**Associate Professor Emma Robertson**
*Coordinator, Bachelor of Design, School of Design Studies*

**Dr Gay McDonald**
*Senior Lecturer, School of Art History and Art Education*

**Andrea North-Samardzic**
*Facilitator, MBT Program, Australian School of Business*

**Professor Matthew Allen**
*Head, Department of Internet Studies*

**Darrall Thompson**
*Director, Teaching and Learning, School of Design*

**Lubna Alam**
*Lecturer, Faculty of Information Sciences and Engineering*

**Dr Richard Mobbs**
*Head, Academic Liaison, IT Services*

**Dr Alejandro Armellini**
*Senior Learning Designer, Beyond Distance Research Alliance*

**Julie Hughes**
*Head, Post-Compulsory Education, School of Education*

**Chris Mitchell**
*Learning and Teaching Coordinator*

# For more Learning to Teach Online, visit the COFA Online Gateway



*To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.*

www.online.cofa.unsw.edu.au

VISIT COFA ONLINE GATEWAY ▶

**Simon McIntyre**
LTTO Project Leader
s.mcintyre@unsw.edu.au
Phone  +61 2 8936 0631

**Karin Watson**
Co-Project Manager
karin@unsw.edu.au
Phone  +61 2 8936 0631

Search for COFA Online on:

## About the project

The Learning to Teach Online project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

## About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW),  Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

## About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

### Australian Learning and Teaching Council

Support for this activity has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.  The views expressed in this activity do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.