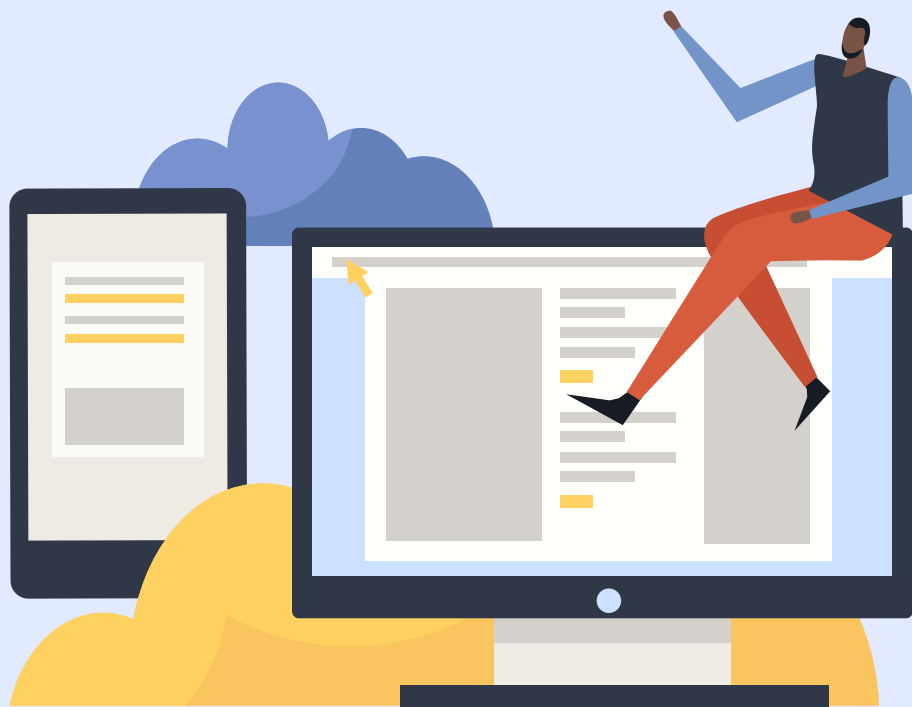# MANAGING THE ONLINE SPACE

A guideline of how to prepare and teach online

The online learning environment presents a unique set of challenges that requires a different level of interaction and management between students and lectures to maintain a meaningful online learning and teaching environment. The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines to alleviate some of these challenges.

The key to effectively managing an online course is to be consistently 'present' in the online space. Although it is not possible to online 24/7 or even every day for each module, regular contact with students helps to assure them that they are well-supported. Through regular communications with students, observations of their discussions with one another in discussion forums, reading the notes they share publicly with one another, and so on, it is possible to connect with students and learn more about them as individuals. The aim of this guide is to assist with ways to achieve a balanced online presence that is manageable for the lecturer and enabling for the students.

Adding a personal touch

A lecturer's presence is a key factor in building student engagement in the online space. This could be a physical or visual presence, such as a picture or a video talking to students, as well as a lecturer's unique angle on the course itself. A more individual touch to the module may encourage students to reciprocate and dedicate effort to the course.

Adding a personal touch includes aspects such as:

- A personal introduction at the beginning of the course that includes photos, audio or video

- Your perspective on a given topic

- Providing links to current information in lecture materials and notes

- The feedback on student work, including written comments, video responses, and/or the occasional one-to-one consultations

- The lecturer's availability for one-to-one communication, via email, chat or consultation hours

Module-level communication

Module-level communication is one-way communication between a lecturer and his/her students where the lecturer provides information to all the students registered for a module (e.g. announcement on Moodle or via e-mail). Following is an elaboration on what is included in module-level communication.

Review and revise online course materials

Reviewing the module's learning outcomes is particularly important, as many assessments have been adjusted from exams to continuous assessment. This is an opportune time to ensure that the materials and assessment strategies are aligned to the learning outcomes.

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In addition, I it is also helpful to update the technical aspects, such as the course material posted, the lecturer profile, broken hyperlinks, outdated information and images, etc.

Send a welcome notice to students

We suggest that lecturers send a class welcome letter to the students registered for the module, which should include the following information:

- Lecturer contact details
- The link to the course (and the self-enrolment key if students are not manually enrolled)
- How to log in
- What materials they need and where they can get them
- Who to contact if they need technical assistance

Communication during the first week of the module

Allow student to familiarise themselves in the online space and the module

Orientate students to the module

As part of the initial orientation to the module post an announcement to the class explaining to them how the module will be completed and what will happen in the module for the remainder of the semester. With this initial communication, expectations are managed, and students are informed, not only what will be expected of them to successfully complete the module but also what they can expect from their lecturer. It will help to eliminate uncertainty and reduce students' anxiety.

Managing student expectations is an important task and will enable the smooth running of the module.

Following is essential information that should be shared with students:

- Refer students to the course outline
- Explain what students will need to do/ have access to, to be successful in the module
- Refer students to an outline of the assessments they will need to complete in the module together with the relevant weighting and deadlines
- Explain how the assessments should be submitted
- Explain what students need to do first to help them prioritize their time
- Explain what students can expect from you (set parameters for communication and feedback)
- The timeframe for marking assessments and posting feedback

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- How regularly communications like email and forums discussions will be responded to

- How an when consultation hours will be conducted

- Communicate the date for the next announcement

Consider the following guidelines when communicating with the students:

- The tone of the communication is important. With written communication, students cannot rely on your non-verbal cues.

- Motivate students and reinforce their potential to succeed in the module.

- Keep it as short and to the point as possible.

- Ensure that the most important points are clear and emphasized.

- Be as specific as possible by, for example, including details about the types of assessment and activities students will complete in the module.

Daily Communication

It is important to let students know upfront about how often they can expect to hear from their lecturer. Checking in at least once each business day and a few times over the weekend is a good rule of thumb. Ideally, we should endeavour to read and respond to e-mail conversations and discussion forums as soon as possible.

It may be helpful to schedule time to engage in this process during the times scheduled on the original timetable. Even though the students may not be available during these slots, as they will be working at their own pace and time (asynchronous) it does enable lectures to effectively segment their time and availability per module.

Consultation hours

Consultation hours could be linked to the original academic timetable to avoid clashes for both the lecturer and the students. However, these need to be communicated to students in the initial module communication. It is also important to let students know if the regular timeslots change.

It is vital to be accessible, as students are required to manage their time carefully, timely feedback is especially important to them. Without it, they may not be able to make progress on their work. Real-time communication can be particularly valuable if a student seems concerned or anxious.

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Monitor class discussions

It is recommended that lecturers subscribe to all discussions so all discussions and responses will be forwarded to your email by subscribing to a discussion. In doing so any urgent questions or possible erroneous opinions can be addressed timeously.

Monitor email

In addition to module-level communication, students will need to interact with their lecturers and should be able to ask questions about the module expectations, content, assessment, etc. Individual communication is two-way communication between a lecturer and a student.

Lecturers should be available to communicate with individual students via email, as such email address should be made available to all students. To manage expectations, communicate to students the timeframe within which they can reasonably expect a response from you via email.

If there are similar questions from students, there are probably other students who are uncertain about the same things. Consider adding a brief 'frequently asked question' section in your weekly module-level communication to clarify these issues. Additionally, content or assessment instructions about which students seem to be unclear should be clarified and, where relevant, students should be referred to additional resources in the weekly communication. This may limit individual emails from students.

Regular weekly communication

Module-level communication is one-way communication between a lecturer and their students where the lecturer provides information to all the students registered for a module (e.g. an announcement on Moodle). It is suggested that lecturers make one module-level announcement per week to guide students on how they should approach the content and/or assessments scheduled for the week.

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Post weekly announcements

The rationale for a weekly communication is to enable continuity and to create a sense of support for students. It is suggested that lecturers keep to one module-level communication per week to avoid overwhelming students with information, bearing in mind that students are registered for several modules, each with its own expectations and workload.

Include the following as part of the weekly announcement:

- Start off stating where you are at in the module now

- Briefly explain what students will need to do in the week

- Consider including a brief response to a few frequently asked questions that you received from individual students

- Provide some feedback on the previous week's work

- Reiterate how students can reach you

Weekly announcements will also keep students informed about your virtual office hours, changes to the planned schedule including, lesson expectations assessments due dates, and the turnaround time for feedback (Rubrics are very helpful to assist with feedback).

Reach out to inactive students

Generally, students value the convenience and flexibility of online learning, but they express concerns about reduced contact with peers and their lecturer, as well as a feeling of being overwhelmed as an individual. Monitoring student progress and intervening early when students need assistance can make a big difference in student retention and success.

Reaching out to students will also provide an indication of which students might join Pathway 2.

Marking assignments

Most modules have shifted focus form exam-based assessment to continuous assessment, as such formative assessments and the associated feedback is incredibly important.

Online students need to self-regulate their time and learning and will need to adapt as needed. Considering this, tell students how long it will take to mark assignments and send meaningful feedback, so they may proceed with their next task or submission.

It is best to grade assignments in sequence (i.e., assignment 1, then assignment 2, and so on) so students can apply the feedback from one assignment to the subsequent assignment.

In some instances, it may be possible to provide automated marking and instant feedback (written and/or verbal) as part of the assessment settings on Moodle. Although it may take some time to set up, it will save time in the long run.

Providing assessment feedback

In a face-to-face class, there may be many ways in which we are constantly checking for understanding, such as looking for confused faces, asking questions, or allowing students time to speak in small groups.

In the online space regular formative assessments should enable both checking for understanding and online engagement.

Regular formative assessment opportunities are an effective way to gain feedback from the students and to provide them feedback simultaneously. These short self-checks are simply a way for students to see whether they understand a new concept, and for lectures to see if you need to clarify any points.

Given that many students may be experiencing heightened anxiety about the current situation and about the transition to an online learning environment, please consider providing feedback frequently, in a timely manner, and in a way that is constructive, specific, and positive.

Assignment feedback provide ideal "teachable moments", which can enable students to succeed. E.g. Simply telling a student "good job" or "needs work" does not give them the information they need to succeed. They need more specifics. What was it that made the work good? (So, they can do it again.) What needs more work and how can they improve the quality of their work?

It is useful to share general feedback, based on what students did well and 'common mistakes' on the discussion forum. It is useful to keep a balance between what students did right and what they need to work on, it tends to motivate students to log on and engage more.

Summarize discussions

Summarize discussion forum conversations, since it can be hard for students to wrap up a discussion highlight the important points before moving on to other discussions!

Example: Instructor Kay Shattuck provided this great summary of one of her class discussions

Great job everyone on the first discussion in our course! Already we saw fine examples of sharing of resources, of budding identification of DE topics you would like to investigate further, and of enriching collaboration to help everyone in the group move ahead.

Several threads emerged over the week:

- Thread 1

- Thread 2

Gather informal student feedback

Once the online has started it is recommended that lectures provide the student with an opportunity to give anonymous feedback, using the survey tool in order to enable students to highlight any challenges they may be experiencing.

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The following questions are recommended:

- » What aspects of the online course are helping you learn?
- » What challenges, if any, are you facing while engaging in remote learning on this course?
- » Are there changes in teaching approaches that could help address these challenges?
- » What strategies are most effective at helping you stay engaged with your peers and the lecturer?
- » Any other comments?

These questions are designed to help students think about what is working, to let lecturers know where they face challenges, and to leverage their knowledge of their situations to help identify possible solutions.

Do highlight to students that the survey is anonymous.

End of module communication

Gather student feedback

Research has shown that the strongest influence on whether a student completes an end-of-course survey is their lecturer. It is recommended that lecturers send students a note that encourages them to complete the anonymous survey and assures them that the information that will only be used to improve the course is important.

Post end-of-class announcement

Post an end-of-class announcement to the students to wrap the course up. Include a final request to complete the student feedback survey and remind students to download or print any work they would like to keep or indicate when access to the course will be ended.

Review and revise course materials for future offerings

When teaching face-to-face, it is expected that an instructor is keeping the content of the course current and is routinely "tweaking" the course based on feedback from students, peers, and administrators. The same is true for teaching online, especially based on the feedback received from students.

Managing the online space checklist

The following checklist concisely captures main points discussed relating to managing the online leaning and teaching space.

Before the Module Starts

- ☐ Review and revise online course materials
- ☐ Send a welcome letter to students
- ☐ Publish course
- ☐ E-mail enrollment details to the course and relevant how-to guides

First Week of the Module

- ☐ Post a personal introduction
- ☐ Review class introductions
- ☐ Summarize students' posts
- ☐ Contact students who haven't accessed the course

Daily Communication

- ☐ Monitor class discussions
- ☐ Monitor email
- ☐ Keep planned consultation hours

Weekly Communication

- ☐ Post weekly announcement
- ☐ Mark formative assignments
- ☐ Share assignment feedback
- ☐ Summarize forum discussions
- ☐ Update class calendar if necessary

Second or Third Week of the Module

- ☐ Reach out to inactive students
- ☐ Gather informal student feedback

End of Module Communication

- ☐ Gather student feedback
- ☐ Post end-of-class announcement
- ☐ Finalize assessments and marks
- ☐ Remind students to download any work they'd like to keep
- ☐ Review and revise course materials for future offerings

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Practical Tips, Tricks and Tools

Teaching online carries with it time adjustments that should be considered and factored into planning the learning and teaching experience. Teaching online can be overwhelming without strategies in place to help manage our time.

Connecting and communicating with students online takes time. Discussion forums will extend and strengthen the social interaction that occurs naturally in a face-to-face class. Students who were otherwise shy, or at least not participative in the live discussion in a f2f class, may come out of their shells and spend some of time participating in online discussions. Students who tend to dominate live discussions should still participate in the online discussions, but others will have a chance to respond because the discussion is asynchronous and extended over time.

However, to enable effective online engagement, time requirements need to be carefully considered for both students and faculty. Managing time is critical in order to prevent students losing motivation or lectures burning out. A balance needs to be found that will work for everyone involved.
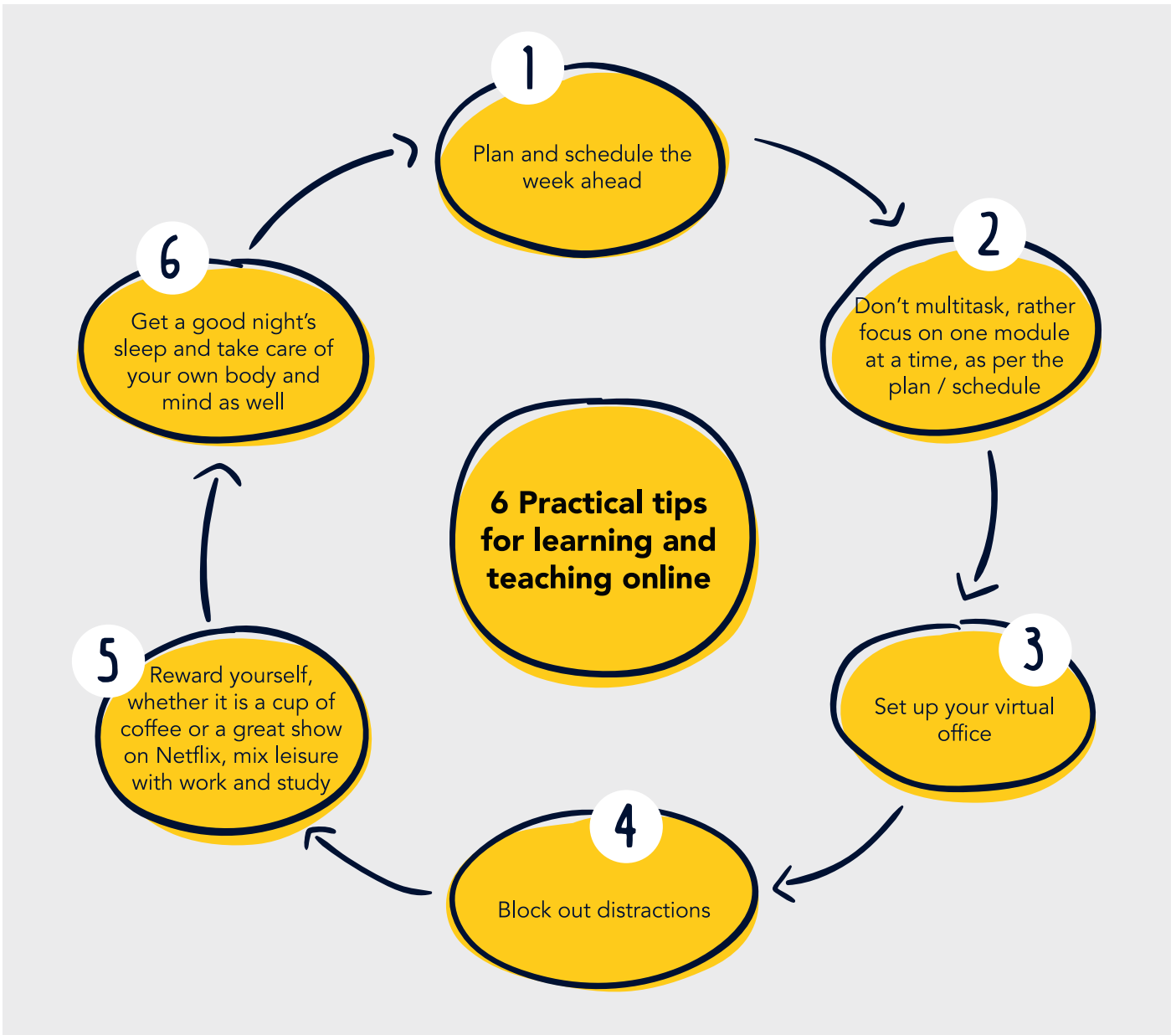
Web Learning Curve

Part of the time management process will be the learning curve in the use of the learning management system (LMS) or other online sites, such Microsoft Teams or Zoom

Take the Focus off the Technology

Just as lecturers may need to learn how to use the LMS to engage students, the students will also require some time. Here are some strategies that can be used to assist the students, saving time and taking the focus off the technology and putting it on the content.

- Structure the course carefully
- Use the discussion forums extensively
- Do not overload the students the first two weeks
- Publish the course schedule in several places in the LMS
- Let the students help each other

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1 Plan and schedule the week ahead

2 Don't multitask, rather focus on one module at a time, as per the plan / schedule

3 Set up your virtual office

4 Block out distractions

5 Reward yourself, whether it is a cup of coffee or a great show on Netflix, mix leisure with work and study

6 Get a good night's sleep and take care of your own body and mind as well

6 Practical tips for learning and teaching online

Acknowledgements

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