UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

CENTRE FOR ONLINE & DISTANCE EDUCATION

Top tips for online student engagement

Are you a Higher Education academic or teacher?

Do you teach students online or contribute to online course design?

If so, this is a handy introduction to engaging students with online teaching and learning. Read on to get the top tips of the Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE).

What do we mean by 'student engagement'?

- Student engagement can be interpreted in different ways.

- One useful definition is 'A set of positive student behaviours' (UCL, 2021). This can include completing work, involvement in learning activities, and interactions with fellow students, teachers, and the wider university.

- The term 'active' engagement is sometimes used, but students don't necessarily need to be 'seen' to be engaging in order to be participating.

Why is student engagement important?

- It has both intrinsic and extrinsic value.

- It is a useful way to check student learning.

- It is widely recognised that higher levels of student engagement correlate to student success (UCL, 2021).

- The Teaching Excellence Framework highlights student engagement as a key aspect of TEF (OFS, 2022). As such, institutions need to put student engagement front and centre.

Top tips

1. Appropriate types and levels of student engagement will vary between students and programmes. It is not one size fits all. It is important to understand this when designing student engagement, and when reviewing it (UCL, 2021).

2. Understand what sort of engagement you are seeking: social, cognitive, behavioural, collaborative, emotional (Redmond et al, 2018):

   • Social – creating community and a feeling of belonging

   • Cognitive – developing critical thinking and understanding

   • Behavioural – developing academic and other study skills

   • Collaborative – developing relationships and learning with/from others

   • Emotional – learning to manage expectations and emotions.

3. Think about academic and social engagement, the difference between them and the value of each (Tinto, 1993):

   • Social – the creation of relationships/connections outside of the classroom. This can be formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer to peer).

   • Academic – student attachment to the intellectual life of the institution at which they are studying. This can be formal (academic performance) and informal (staff/student interaction).

4. Connect student engagement to learning outcomes. Make it clear to students what the benefits of engaging are (in relation to assessment, wider skills, employability etc).

5. Adopt a consistent structure for each course/programme so students get into a rhythm and understand how/when they need to engage. Make It easy for students to find and access opportunities to interact with the community (tutors and other students).

6. Think about which tools you are using. Different tools are useful for different sorts of interaction. Some tools are better for asynchronous or synchronous engagement. Some tools might be better for reaching certain students (so, consider hard to reach students and issues of diversity) (UCL, 2021).

7. Set the tone/expectation when introducing an activity, such as a forum task. Make it clear to students how and when they are expected to engage.

8. Understand that 'passive' students may actually be 'actively' learning (e.g., a student taking part in a forum activity can learn from others even if they don't post themselves!). Understand this, but also consider how you can check the learning of those students.

9. Engage students as partners: students work with academics and each other to create and extend their learning, which has a positive impact on student community (Healey et al, 2014).

10. Think about engaging students through situated and authentic learning (so link to real-life experiences).

11. Give students the opportunity to ask questions. Offer online drop-in/Q&A sessions at regular intervals (which might be at course or programme level, depending on the structure of the course/programme).

12. Give students the opportunity to feed in/feedback/review. Find out from them what's worked well and what could work better.

13. Model good practice when designing student engagement activities. You don't need to reinvent the wheel! Ask your colleagues what worked well for them (UCL, 2021).

Further reading

For detailed suggestions for encouraging student social, cognitive, behavioural, collaborative, and emotional engagement, check out UCL's best practice **guidance**.

Contact

This guide has been produced by the Centre for Distance and Online Education (**CODE**) 'Student Engagement' Special Interest Group.

To contact us, please email: **code@london.ac.uk** or find us on twitter: **twitter.com/codelondon**

References

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