

Unit 8 Issues in student support

One of the most common misconceptions tutors have about their students is that they will know exactly what to do after logging on and feel inherently comfortable engaging online. Really, nothing could be further from the truth!

Students come from different academic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds with different areas of expertise and a wide range of expectations. Some are familiar with educational technology while others may have never even sent an e-mail. A significant number of students are not necessarily experienced and skilled online learners nor necessarily at ease with the use of web 2.0 technologies for academic purposes (Cowan et al, 2009). Furthermore, not all students are self-directed learners and will require more online guidance and support than others.

The written mode of online communication has been shown to support the reticent student especially well, but proves particularly challenging for the visually impaired, dyslexic or non-native speaking student. Work and family-related commitments have more serious time management implications for the mature student members of a class. The overseas student may be struggling with time zone differences and online assignment due dates or simply a slow internet connection. Indeed, the online learner community is one of unrivalled diversity and poses new challenges for the tutor.

1.0 Individual differences

Whether teaching fully online or using online tools to support a face-to-face lecture, it is important to recognise and identify the differences among learners as early as possible in the term in order to accommodate their individual needs better. Learners who feel that their abilities and backgrounds are valued and accounted for are more likely to be highly motivated and engaging.

1.1 Getting to know your students

In the first week of the term making a few simple, but purposeful activities available online will not only help you to get to know your students better, but will give your student the opportunity to familiarise themselves with you, one another, the online tools and their online classroom without the pressure of looming assignment deadlines.

1.2 Welcoming and student bonding strategies

In week 1 of the term:

1.2.1 Create an introduction (asynchronous) discussion

Create an introduction discussion in which the students are requested to supply not only name, but also IT experience to date, academic or vocational background, reasons for taking the module, and expectations of it. The students should be gently encouraged to respond to fellow students online at this time. The discussion message might sound something like this:

Example

Dear Class!

Let us use this opportunity to get to know one another. In a direct response to this discussion message, please introduce yourself. In your response, include

- your name (how would you like to be addressed?)
- reasons for taking this course
- academic background
- online learning experience to date
- fears and/or expectations of this course.

You are encouraged to respond to each other – it's great practice for the online discussions yet to come!

I look forward to meeting and working with everyone,

Your tutor

Intended purpose:

Tutor: can identify and address degree of language skills, IT expertise, anxieties, and misconceptions early on in the term. For example, to an especially worried student, the tutor might respond:

Example

Thank you, Paula, and welcome to class!

I understand your concerns and encourage you to contact me at anytime for support-remember, that's what I am here for. And by the way, you have already successfully used one of the most important online communication tools by simply introducing yourself here. You're well on your way!

Your tutor

Student: builds sense of classroom community, opportunity to practice use of asynchronous communication tool in informal setting, ie, without looming assignment deadlines.

1.2.2 Create a fun discussion area

Create a fun discussion area in order to demonstrate the functionalities of online discussion boards to your students. Uploading a humorous image from an image repository (eg SCRAN) and asking for caption suggestions (alias Caption Competition) quickly draws in all students and fuels the growth of a discussion thread, often new to students.

1.2.3 Create a virtual scavenger hunt

Create a Virtual Scavenger Hunt in which ten questions navigate the student to either the online tools the student will be expected to use or to information student is expected to be well familiar with. The questions can be tailored to the fully online or blended module.

Example

Virtual Scavenger Hunt

For your first assignment, please answer the following questions in a Word document save it and submit it to the Assignment Dropbox. Then send me an e-mail letting me know you have submitted your answers. This is an ungraded assignment intended to fine tune your online orientation skills and give you the opportunity to practice using two important tools, the Assignment Dropbox and e-mail. I will return the assignment with only brief comments which I ask you to check for in your Gradebook. This will ensure that we are communicating!

The questions are:

1. Who are the members of the module leader team?
2. When and where is the final exam?
3. Where do you post questions to the module content or assignments?
4. Online discussion participation makes up what percent of your final grade?
5. Where will we meet for the second on-site study day?
6. Which online features are you expected to use?
7. Where can you find peer reviewed articles on the web/in the library that address...?

...and so on, depending the way in which you are using the online classroom to support your teaching and what you expect your students to have read and understood before lessons begin.

(Originally written for modules delivered for University of Maryland University College, UMUC, USA.)

Intended purpose:

Tutor: Quick way to identify and address student's navigational (IT) and conceptual problems. Prevents misunderstandings later on in term. Also tests electronic submission and e-mail tool within the VLE.

Student: Encourages student to read thoroughly module overview, guidelines, assignment specifications and study time commitment. May prompt student to withdraw at this time due to prior false module expectations. Opportunity to practice using assignment submission box and e-mail tool early for use later on. Builds confidence.

1.2.4 Other welcoming and bonding strategies

- Have learners interview each other via e-mail and then post introductions for each other on the introductory discussion board.
- Assign students to create a personal homepage including a photo.
- Create an informal area of communication for students to share their favourite web links, books or movies. Be sure to call it 'Chatterbox' or 'TeaTime'. Keep open for contributions throughout course. (Reinforces bonding between learners.)

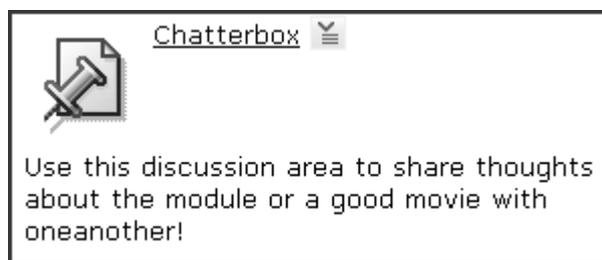


Figure 22: Informal communications area for students in a WebCT module

- Create a Problems Forum for technical, module content, assessment related queries. Keep it open for the duration of the course (ensures continuous support and more peer and topic focused posts in the discussion areas, enables peer mentoring).

2.0 Online learning orientation

Those students new to educational technology often have grave misconceptions about studying online, mistaking online learning solely as a self-paced, independent form of study. Although online learning is not fully independent study, it does require independent study-skills, self-directed learning and more self-discipline than studying face to face.

It is important that you assist students understand the nature and demands of studying online, particularly in relation to:

- **Expectations:** Think about the purpose of online technology for your course. Are you using it to make administrative information such as your contact details and office hours available online? Or have you created self-test quizzes for the students to monitor their learning? Whatever you decide to use online technology for be sure to let the student know on the very first day and avoid students' disappointment! For example, on the

homepage of your module list exactly what they can expect to find from you online (eg *'In this module you will find web resources and weekly self-test quizzes...'*)

- **Time management:** Students who don't have good time management skills will struggle to study effectively online unless you provide them with more than just a specific timeline. Opportunities for checking their progress, discussion participation deadlines, and prompt feedback are just a few examples of effective measures to compensate for the lack of visual and oral cues of lecture based instruction. Encourage students not to fall behind by requiring regular logins, keeping written material relevant and up to date, aligning reading assignments to tasks such as open ended questions for collaborative online discussion with peers. Create self-tests or draft submission opportunities in order to provide support throughout the term. Inquire about the absence of unengaged students in a private e-mail.
- **IT skills:** Students will be coming to Higher Education with a wide range of IT-skills and it is important to recognise extra support needs early in the term. Probe for your students' IT confidence by simply asking them! The introduction discussion is a good opportunity for students to not only reveal their names and interests but also their experience using the computer. Have them use the online features that you will require in the following weeks such as electronic assignment submission or e-mailing with attachments in order to give them opportunity to practice and flag problems early on. Provide links to the student help sheets available from C&IT services and Professional Development's WebCT Student help page (available through the student portal at <https://studentportal.napier.ac.uk>). Encourage the more IT-literate to assist the others.
- **Web literacy skills:** While students will be all too familiar with 'googling' they will not necessarily have the web searching, researching or evaluation skills to find, retrieve and critically evaluate information on the web. Web literacy skills are invaluable, but often underrated. There are wonderful online tutorials (see, eg <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/> and <http://www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/> available for students to learn to understand and use a wide range of formats of information from a wide range of internet sources.
- **Netiquette:** E-mail, listservs, chat rooms, discussion boards, blogs and wikis are all valuable tools for supporting communication online. Students who are unfamiliar with these modes of online communication are usually unaware of the extra care that must be given to written expression to avoid misunderstandings. It is imperative that students are directed to online communication rules such as the netiquette guidelines (see [Appendix 8](#)) before engaging in online communication with their peers. Potential problems are magnified in classes of native and non-native speakers. It is important that you, the tutor, always maintain a warm and encouraging tone in all your online communication. Address any problems with students in private e-mail messages.

- **Effective use of online tools:** As indicated above, giving students opportunity to practice using the online tools you expect them to use during the term will ensure that they use them effectively when it is required of them. Be sure to provide a mini-quiz for example, if an objective assessment is planned. This will give students the opportunity to check server and connection requirements beforehand and adjust accordingly. Have students engage in an informal discussion or chat in week one to familiarise them with the intricacies of discussion threads or chatroom activity. Require of your students an e-mail or electronic assignment submission to ensure all modes of communication are working. Be sure that online help documents and help contact numbers are available for assistance with the tools.
- **The nature of the learning:** Learning online can take many different forms and it is important that it is made clear to the students how they are expected to engage with a task. A group-work assignment is clearly a collaborative form of learning-do your students understand the benefits of group-work? Should the group submit one joint assignment or are students expected to write up and submit individually? Would you encourage students to work together on self-test quizzes or is it important that they reinforce individual understanding? Reading is an individual effort but sharing thoughts in a discussion area online provides a valuable opportunity for collaborative learning online. What is required of the student at the face-to-face tutorial sessions? Do the students know what level of support and feedback they can expect from you at all times? Let them know and avoid misunderstandings.
- **The benefits of self-paced learning:** Learning online is a means of enabling self-paced learning as it is a more flexible delivery than lecture based delivery. It allows for 'Just-In-Time' learning which means students can access learning materials and engage in online activities from anywhere at anytime. Enabling features such as self-test quizzes, which return results on demand, for example, give students the opportunity to measure the progress of their learning on their own. Referring to e-books and journals ensures availability of learning resources to all regardless of library opening hours!

Tip: Provide a document that defines the students' own responsibilities as learners, such as 'The successful online learner' sample document in Appendix 3, free for you to use and tailor accordingly.

2.1 Technological support

While it is true that technology should not be the focus of online learning, certainly the student must be adequately prepared for using online tools and carrying out relevant online tasks and assured of technological support throughout the term. Students are exceptionally vulnerable in the first week of a new term and special care should be taken to prepare and support the student for the technological

challenges of online learning. Frank Rennie of UHI writes, 'In situations where technical support is minimal or absent, there can be considerable extra stress placed upon users' which has a direct affect on student retention (Rennie, 2003).

2.2 Programme and module level guidance

Effective and meaningful online learning begins with clear communication to the student of the programme and modular approach to online learning. In the fully online module, especially, where all instruction is in written format, students rely even more so on explicit and comprehensive guidelines to all online components that support their learning from day one of the term.

The online Module Guide (ie, module handbook or syllabus) will usually encompass module overview, planner, timeline and/or module team element of the online classroom. Its content will depend largely on the way in which you are using online components, whether to enhance a lecture or to a support fully online module. The online module guide is particularly relevant to the student for planning his study and should be as complete and as accurate as possible. It is the student's 'lifeline' to online learning.

► See [Unit 3](#) for further guidance on recommended Module Guide content.

3.0 Continuous facilitation

You are your student's best online role model and by being pro-active and 'visible' throughout the term you are not only enhancing the student's learning experience, but demonstrating good online practice as well.

Good visibility already begins with contact details (location, e-mail, telephone) and a photo in the Module Guide. Beginning the term with a warm and inviting welcome message on the module's homepage encourages the student to probe further. Ensuring timely and supportive responses to e-mails and conference discussion posts acknowledges student activity and engagement.

3.1 Key considerations

3.1.1 Clarity, depth and usability of course materials

Building the student's confidence as an online learner wherever the opportunity arises is a key objective. This begins with the actual writing of course material. When writing course material such as an introduction to a new topic or an assignment specification, it is important for you to bear a few things in mind.

- Most students are unaccustomed to learning from written lessons. Create clear and concise written material.
- The online reader is a picky one. It is important to pay particular attention to accuracy and grammatical quality of the written work.
- Students will not read 12 pages of lecture notes online. Short bits of information are less strenuous and hence more likely to be read and understood. Send student to a good book instead of expecting them to read reams of lecture notes.
- Online material need not be static. Including relevant hyperlinks to websites or online reading material exposes the learner to subject-related, elaborative and/or contrasting information. Doing so brings the lesson to life and enhances student outreach to relevant and enriched course material. (See also Unit 3 section 3.6 and [Appendix 5](#).)

Examples of links to include:

- Text links to e-books, e-journals, repositories, online newspaper articles
- Website links to educational, commercial, government, non-profit organisational, publisher site pages. (Links should always open in a new browser window and allow the student to return to the homepage.)

3.1.2 Accessibility considerations

When writing online content bear in mind that a not insignificant number of students may have special needs due to visual impairments or dyslexia, for example. Some may be reliant on assistive technologies to access the information in your written material. It is all of our responsibility to make learning material as readable as possible for a larger number of people.

As a rule stick to web pages (HTML, XHTML file format) for online content. When producing online content the biggest accessibility gain is by ensuring that the user can amend the look and feel of the content to suite individual needs. By following a few simple font and structural techniques you can improve the accessibility and usability of your written electronic material:

- Keep font style and size consistent. Edinburgh Napier standard is Arial, 12 pt
- Avoid overuse of italics/underlining
- Avoid overuse of font/background colour.
- Keep variety of icons to a minimum.
- Keep writing and references current
- Proofread and double check for spelling mistakes
- Set up hyperlinks to open up in new browser window
- Check for broken links regularly
- Check for coherence with all other written material
- Where ever possible make Word documents available in PDF format as well
- When reading a document in your browser (eg Microsoft® Internet Explorer) be aware that you (and your students) can change font size, style, and background colour of a written electronic text by choosing Tools and then Internet Options on the browser menu bar. Within the menu bars

of Word and PDF docs there are functions to increase text size and change background colour as well.

Furthermore, in order to ensure ease of access for all to online module content and tools the following recommendations also apply:

- Provide clear navigational guidance in the homepage welcome message: 'Begin this module by clicking on...first. Then proceed to...'
- Label links appropriately
- Make key topics for study easily accessible in the module overview
- Make content searchable
- Include a glossary
- Enable a compile and print tool
- Allow for electronic and paper-based submission format.

Refer to the UK's accessibility advisory service, TechDis at <http://www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=1> for further guidance in issues of accessible design for all users as well as the Edinburgh Napier Professional Development team's guidelines for WebCT at <http://www2.napier.ac.uk/webct/staff/documents/accessibility.pdf>.

► See Unit 3 section 3.7 for further guidance on accessible online content.

3.1.3 Just-in-time guidance

Students studying online benefit greatly from reminders, instructions and task-related guidance to assist them deliver an assignment to the best of their ability. Never hesitate within the module to direct students to the next task, remind them of expected reference styles or minimum word requirements. Despite the guidance provided in your Module Overview, for example, additional guidance embedded within the appropriate assignment or task, will support the online student even better.

Some examples include:

- Remind of deadlines for online discussion participation right within your opening post, *'We look forward to hearing from you, but remember you will need to post by...'*
- Post weekly notices or reminders on the Noticeboard or Announcements area (eg *'Reminder! We will meet in room 201 on Wednesday'* or *Just a wee reminder that Assignment 2 is due midnight tonight to the Dropbox'* or *'Remember to contact your group members as soon as possible.'* Today we begin with Unit 2' etc.)
- At the bottom of the instructions of an assignment direct the student to the next task: *'After you have submitted your answers please proceed to the Reading Assignment x'*
- Within the resource list add reminders to download appropriate software such as Adobe Acrobat Reader for viewing PDF files.
- Remind students of the discussion topic in the timeline as well as in the course content area.

- Praise students for tasks completed whenever you can: In an Announcement: *'Well done for your grand discussion participation last week!'*, within the weekly unit introduction area: *'Judging by the quality of your answers last week you will find this week's topic easy to understand...'* or in an encouraging e-mail, *'Jill, I know you are disappointed that your grade is not quite as high as you had hoped, but by paying closer attention to...'*
- Contact 'absent' students in a private e-mail gently enquiring if they need any assistance.
- Respond to enquiries in a timely manner (ie 24-48 hours, even if it is only to say the enquiry is being looked into.)
- Admit defeat when technology fails and openly share online learner grief, eg in e-mail message to all students: *'Dear student, as you are aware, we are experiencing technical difficulties. Please know everything is being done to resolve the problem and your patience is greatly appreciated. This will not affect your grade in any way. Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.'*

3.2 Supporting student flexibility in ways of working

Learners learn and work differently!

As educators, you will be fully aware of the different ways in which students approach their studies. By creating different opportunities online for learning you will give learners the chance to learn in ways that suit them best. Learners can be seen to adopt any one or combination of four approaches to learning which are:

1. Auditory and verbal: preference for spoken or written words
2. Reflective: preference for observation or reflection
3. Visual: preference for charts, maps, images, diagrams, films
4. Tactile, kinesthetic : preference for active engagement, role play, simulations, games.

In other words, some learners learn best while reading, others need graphics to enhance their understanding, hence multiple approaches to online design and delivery accommodates different approaches and better learning.

Generally speaking covering less content and actively engaging students more has been shown to achieve higher levels of understanding-all the more reason to offer plenty of opportunity for activities such as:

- a visit to the local library, planetarium or botanic garden.
- interviewing a patient
- videotaping a field study
- e-mailing a publisher
- studying the phases of the moon
- following and recording the stock market trends
- evaluating a website, podcast or video clip

- chairing a study group activity
- downloading a paper
- evaluating a TV/radio advertisement – and much, much more!

Using a wide variety of online activities, assessment types, navigational paths, reading and researching assignments will ensure that the learner has sufficient opportunities to learn and subsequently to demonstrate learning. Muddling through alone at home with a stack of downloaded lecture notes is not good online learning, and doing so can easily lead to feelings of student isolation and stress. Making a wide variety of material and support available to the student (which may include face-to-face tutorials) accounts for differences between learners.

► See [Unit 6](#) for further guidance on designing a variety of online activities.

A range of environments stimulates learning. Using a combination of verbal/visual/graphical/audio/written representation for delivering content material establishes a blend of information formats which best account for different talents, preferences and approaches to learning.

For example

- A short web video-clip or narrated screencast can reinforce a written lesson
- A graphical representation of data will support the recognition of trends
- Audio instruction assists the visually impaired and breaks up the monotony of written text for all.

► See [Unit 7](#) for further guidance on use of multimedia to support learning.

4.0 Communication

The online teaching and learning environment provides many opportunities for communication and collaboration such as in an asynchronous discussion board, by using e-mail, holding synchronous chats, or asking students to create blogs or wikis.

Online, all students have a 'voice' and can benefit from the advantages of online communication which include

- no need to fight for air-time
- more time for reflection, research, evaluation
- non-native speakers given more equal footing
- reticent student given time to build confidence.

Nevertheless, it is important to be aware that most students are not experienced online learners and may never have used online tools to communicate. In this section you can find advice and guidelines to best prepare your students for the asynchronous discussion and synchronous chat.

► See [Unit 5](#) for information on additional modes of online communication such as audio and video teleconferencing, blogs and wikis.

4.1 The asynchronous discussion

The asynchronous discussion is one of the most common modes of communicating online and it is recommended to make use of it to support activities that require time for research and reflection, often resulting in richer and deeper levels of understanding than in the face-to-face equivalent.

By making three different asynchronous conference types available, each with its specific purpose, for example, the online learner is supported in formal and informal modes of communication either with one another or with the tutor.

The three types might include:

- Social Space (also known as Chatterbox, Teatime, Lounge etc): informal online discussion area for students to talk about non-modular related issues such as the latest movie or new book. Often the first instance a student new to online learning will respond
- Problems Forum: direct students to post course content or administrative questions here rather than in private e-mails. Eventually an FAQ file can be made available
- Weekly Topic Discussion: for weekly discussions in which knowledge is applied, contested and constructed in a collaborative online environment, moderated by the tutor. The first weekly discussion should be an introduction session (see section 1.1 Getting to know your students).

4.1.1 Preparing for the online discussion

The success of the formal online discussion begins with its organisation which include:

- An opportunity to practice using the discussion tool before the formal discussion activities (eg week 1 orientation)
- Documentation about functionality of the tool (in Module Guide, see [Unit 3](#))
- Learning outcomes and timetable for discussions
- Establishing participation ground rules, ie, a mutual code of conduct (netiquette guidelines, see [Appendix 8](#))
- Establishing a participation requirement
- Establishing the relevance of online communication and social skills to the student not only for the module but also for the workplace.

4.1.2 Stages of the asynchronous discussion

An online discussion does not begin with the discussion question itself, but rather long before in a stage of knowledge acquisition. When preparing an online discussion activity ask yourself: 'Have I given the student enough opportunity to learn about a topic well enough to critically discuss it with others?' Giving the

student these learning opportunities in a preparatory stage lays the foundation for rich discussion activity later on.

The preparatory phase can be regarded as the first of three stages of the online discussion in each of which the tutor plays a central role:

Stage 1. Preparatory phase in which the student accumulates knowledge and information

- The student reads, researches, interviews
- Tutor as facilitator of knowledge.

Stage 2: Discussion phase in which student applies and creates knowledge, prompted by, for example, an open-ended, thought-stimulating or even provocative question

- The student ponders, reflects, compares, analyses, contrasts in mutual critical discourse with peers
- Tutor as moderator of knowledge.

Stage 3: Post discussion phase in which tutor summarises, emphasises, affirms, adds, concludes.

- Tutor as mediator of knowledge.

► See [Unit 4 section 4.2](#) for online moderation guidance.

4.1.3 Online discussion assessment strategies

It is recommended to encourage and reward online discussion participation by assessing it, provided the assessment is closely related to the learning outcomes of the course. There are several strategies that lend themselves equally well to the assessment of a student's online participation. Common to each is the emphasis on quality rather than quantity of a response. It is common for online discussion participation to make up 10–50% of a student's final grade, depending on the mode of delivery, subject and learning objectives, aims and goals for that particular course. Assessing online discussion participation is a form of continuous assessment and therefore supports and reassures the online learner particularly well.

Assessment techniques are not restricted to awarding points based on a set of content criteria/rubric for discussion posts (see [Unit 6 section 5.4](#)) but could include:

- Assessing as one element of a Reflective Learning Journal: Student submits transcripts of posts as evidence for a summative assignment/essay.
- Count choice of best participation only
- Peer assessment assignment
- Reflective account of online participation experience by student at the end of the term.

4.2 Synchronous chat

Using the chat tool to carry out teaching and learning activities raises a whole new set of issues to be aware of than when considering use of the discussion tool. Students spread apart geographically will need to be made aware of time zone differences which can seriously impede opportunities for some students to participate in a chat activity. In order to avoid confusion chats are usually not recommended with more than five students at any one time. Some chat tools offer hand raise functions (crowd control) which enable individual responses from students picked by the tutor and support a more controlled mode of interaction. Furthermore, the chat tool as a communications tool is notorious for bad spelling and digressing conversation and it is easy as moderator to lose track if typing speeds vary greatly. Nevertheless, the chat room is a valuable venue for

4.2.1 Preparing for a chat activity

Before the chat

In order for a chat activity to be a rewarding learning experience for the student, as with the asynchronous discussion, you must clearly indicate the nature, use and purpose of the tool to them.

- Give your students the opportunity to try out the chat tool before the formal chat activity (as a week 1 orientation activity, for example).
- Make documentation available about the functionality of the tool
- In the Module Guide establish clearly: learning outcomes and timetable for chat activities; participation ground rules ie a mutual code of conduct (netiquette guidelines, see [Appendix 8](#)); participation requirement; relevance of online communication and social skills not only for the module but also for the workplace.

The chat activity

There are a wide range of activities that can be accomplished in the chat room, its synchronous (instantaneous) nature, however, lends itself particularly well for brainstorming, clarifying misconceptions and quick decision-making (between group members, for example). Carrying out a role-play or debate is also often done in the chat room and whatever the activity, it is of paramount importance that students are well prepared, well ahead of time, for the particular task.

► See [Unit 5 section 2](#) for more examples of using the chatroom to support teaching and learning.

Avoid the frustrations and confusion chat activities can bring by

- Limiting chats to 4–5 students
- Limiting chat sessions to 30–60 minutes
- Sharing assigned readings, resources, chat instructions and guidelines to students one week in advance.

Recommended guidelines for students include

- Enter the chat room by greeting the others
- Be considerate at all time of others and be patient
- Come prepared to take notes
- Complete the assigned readings before the chat session
- Write in complete sentences
- Limit your response to 6-8 lines.
- Keep sentences as short as possible.
- Adhere to any hand-raise agreements.
- Leave the chat room by saying goodbye.

During the chat

Students with poor typing skills and international students will have difficulty keeping up with a quickly unfolding chat thread. On the other hand you may have to deal with pro-active students and time-delays caused by different internet speed connections. As a chat moderator there are a number of strategies you can adopt in order to make it a worthwhile experience for all.

- Be sure you are there on time!
- Allow a few minutes for students to settle down.
- Open the chat session officially ('I see everyone is present and we can begin...').
- Remind students of the chat room guidelines.
- Respond to each student by name.
- Use the hand raise mode to structure the chat and to ensure that 'loud' participants don't overpower the rest. Otherwise, require students to raise hands by typing two exclamation points (no text) and posting if they would like to respond.
- Pace the chat by splitting your response to a student into two or three messages.
- Don't hesitate to exclude a student not adhering to agreed guidelines
- Have a contingency plan in place! In case of internet disconnections be sure students know what to do and what to expect in terms of alternatives for the chat activity.

4.3 E-mail

E-mail is also well suited to support teaching and learning activities but more often than not you will be faced with queries, panic attacks or requests for guidance and advice. The seeming immediacy of online communication, but especially for e-mail, may tempt students to follow up their original mail with another merely a few hours later, often unaware of time zone differences (or your 100 other commitments!).

In the interest of your own time management (and sanity), it will be up to you to put forward the terms and conditions for e-mail communication with your students. For a list of suggested **e-mail rules** to post in the Module Guide folder of your VLE see [Appendix 11](#).

► See [Unit 5](#) for further guidance on using online communication tools to support student learning.

5.0 The international student

A course that involves international students can benefit enormously from the cross-cultural exchange, but there are barriers to be aware of-especially if the course includes an online component.

5.1 Online content and design

The most obvious barrier to understanding content of course is language. Most non-native English speakers will have achieved the language proficiency requirement upon enrolment in your course. Their language skills may be rudimentary, however, and they will rely on concise and explicitly written guidance as well as straightforward online navigation. It is important to be consistent with terminology (eg use course, module or class; use assignment, assessment or essay etc) and to be careful not to unintentionally offend certain cultural groups with the choice of icons and images.

Careful consideration must also be given to the prescribed core text and other reading assignments. Can the international students keep up with the pace of the reading? Are the readings comparable to the level of reading comprehension and if not, is there assistance available for that group of students? What are the alternatives to reading for understanding?

Technology may assist you in finding ways to enhance an idea or concept, enabling better reading understanding. For example:

- Is there an image, audio or video clip available that might complement the reading?
- Could pairing up a non-native speaker with a native speaker in an online chat allow for peer-peer support and better understanding?
- Consider making short online self-test quizzes available after reading assignments to ensure basic knowledge level of understanding.
- An online glossary also helps reinforce knowledge and build vocabulary.
- Be aware of avoiding culture specific examples in course materials
- Finally, be sure to capture the interest of all students by referring to global topics, events, laws and celebrities in your assignments whenever possible rather than focussing only on national issues.

► See [Unit 6 section 4.5](#) for further guidance on inclusive design.

5.2 Online communication

Far more challenging to enable is rich online communication between native and non-native speakers. While the asynchronous discussion in particular offers advantages for the non-native speakers who can take time to read and reread posts and then also to double-check their own written statements, they still often feel inhibited to share their thoughts online for fear of being misunderstood or ridiculed. It is solely up to you to create a supportive and safe online learning environment from the outset, one in which it is clear that all contributions are valued and all participants are expected to treat each other with respect. Let your students know that they are a diverse group and that you ask to avoid using slang, dialect or idiomatic expressions for better understanding. Avoid sarcasm and use humour sparingly yourself, as it can cause unnecessary confusion among the non-native speaking cohort.

It is important to be aware that synchronous forms of communication such as chat rooms are particularly problematic for non-native speakers who usually cannot keep up with the reading or writing pace of the others. It is recommended to keep chat room sizes to 5 or less contributors and to avoid making the chat a part of the formal assessment in classes with international students.

5.3 Teaching style

The cultural patterns of learning that exist may differ from the Western idea of instruction which sees the engaged student, and not the master teacher, at the centre of teaching. It will completely overwhelm some international students accustomed to having knowledge delivered to them, to be asked to share views with others in an online discussion, to collaborate with peers in a group or to be prompted by you to post thoughts to an open-ended question. Be sure to give all students the opportunity to practice any of the above forms of learning in an induction week activity and provide lots of positive feedback and encouragement when they get it right. Instead of using prompts like, 'Anyone with an idea?' formulate a clear statement such as, 'Please post your response to my question by 6 pm (CET) Thursday'.

It is imperative that all students and international students in particular, are given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with and practice proper referencing and citation skills before writing essays or assignments. Furthermore, practice opportunities for correct citation, paraphrasing and referencing will help students understand that practices such as copying expert knowledge to 'honour the master' are deemed plagiarism in Western cultures. Consider using the text matching software, Turnitin®UK, as a diagnostic tool to assist international students identify referencing problems and learn to remedy them (see [Unit 10 section 3.2](#)).

► See [Unit 10 section 3](#) for further guidance on encouraging proper referencing.

5.4 Studying at a distance

International students studying from abroad on fully online courses are challenged additionally by time zone differences, different holiday schedules and unreliable internet connections. Scheduling real-time (synchronous) activities may not be feasible for the whole class, but possibly for smaller groups. Coursework deadlines must take the range of working hours into account and online exams should be made available for at least a 24–48 hour period (with a 3 hour submission limit for example). Furthermore, be aware of the hardware and software implications for your students before relying too heavily on multimedia elements in your course. Is the software freely available for downloading on the web? Can you expect students to purchase additional software or hardware and if so where have they been instructed to do so? Will the students' connections speeds allow for reasonable downloading times? Are there low-tech alternatives?

► See [Unit 7](#) for further advice on creating multimedia for teaching.

5.5 Conclusion

While it is always important to clearly delineate terms, conditions, expectations and guidelines of a course to students, this is especially true for classes with international students. Therefore, if you expect international students in your blended or online class be sure to share with them as early in the term as possible:

- Language skills resources
- Software/hardware requirements
- Core module materials such as books and journals
- Online participation guidelines
- Role of the VLE/student/tutor (underpinning learning model)
- Tutor/Help contact information readily available
- Library access.
- Academic support provision for international students at <http://www.napier.ac.uk/napierlife/campuslife/Pages/AcademicStudySupport.aspx>

6.0 Further reading

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