Tip sheet – Culturally responsive digital learning

In its [Values and ethos statement](#), Flinders' *Making a difference: The 2025 agenda* states that 'We champion diversity and equality of opportunity, respecting peoples from all nations, cultures and backgrounds', requiring our institution to 'embrace diversity and promote equity, inclusion and social responsibility.'

The Flinders student cohort is diverse with students from many backgrounds. Approximately 20 percent of all Flinders University students are international students, and 1 percent are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ([2019 figures](#)). Given that [Student-centred learning](#) is also an underlying ethos of Flinders' *Making a difference: The 2025 agenda*, it is imperative that teaching is culturally responsive and inclusive of all learners.

Demonstrating cultural inclusivity may occur in diverse ways. Drawing on key resources such as the [Reconciliation Action Plan May 2020 – May 2022 (RAP)](#), this tip sheet addresses some design and delivery considerations that are pertinent to FLO. While there is a focus on ideas from RAP the tips included can also be applied to students from other cultural backgrounds.

Key questions

Some questions that may help you think about how you develop and teach into your topic include:
- How does my teaching promote 'equity, inclusion and social responsibility'?
- How does/could the content in my topic/course 'relate[] to, represent[], and honor[] the cultural diversity within the students [I] teach' (Bass and Lawrence-Riddell 2020)?
- 'In what ways am I providing entry and connections into my [topic] that speak to the diverse experiences of my learners?' (Bass and Lawrence-Riddell 2020)?
- Who are my students? What is their demographic and how can I be sensitive to their needs during the delivery of the topic?

FLO topic features

The Topic Demographic Dashboard (linked in the 'Topic links' block if you are a topic coordinator) will show you the demographics of enrolled students, which may include international and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (if they've identified as such during the enrolment process). This information can help you to prepare for and teach the topic's cohort inclusively.

A deliverable of the [RAP](#) (p. 19) is to '[d]evelop, communicate and implement cultural protocol to increase staff understanding of the purpose and significance of cultural protocols, including protocols for 'Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country'. A link to the acknowledgement appears in FLO and you can alert students to what this means in a [welcome](#)/orientation video or in face-to-face sessions. You may wish to ask students from other countries to share similar the acknowledgment or welcome messages from their own countries.

University resources and services

The [RAP](#) (p. 18) supports the University Library's [special collections](#) 'to assist in driving cultural learning', as well as '[c]ontinu[ing] to develop our library of resources authored and/or collaboratively developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.' This collection includes the subjects 'Aboriginal education' and 'Asian studies'.

The Flinders Art Museum (FUMA) has an [online collections catalogue](#) which includes a 'nationally significant collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art' ([RAP](#), p. 18). FUMA 'promotes museum-based teaching and learning' through the [Object-based learning toolkit](#). Users can [create a Lightbox](#), then export it as a PDF and upload to FLO for sharing with other students/teachers, if required, respecting the User

Agreement re image use and access. Contact FUMA for ideas about how to embed artworks in learning and teaching.

The Student portal links to support and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Yunggorendi Student Engagement) and international students (International Student Services). Ensure that you make your students aware of these supports when the topic commences and on a needs basis during the topic's timespan.

Topic design

As with many online good practice principles, the learning design principles that would enable culturally responsive FLO sites that benefit and speak to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and international students will benefit and speak to **all** students. Learning design decisions should always 'consider the impact of culture' (Reedy 2019, p. 132).

Learning activities should aim to be as flexible as possible with a diverse student cohort in mind, as this is a given (culture, age, gender etc). Activities should give students choice where possible as to what they do, how they do it, and in what timeframe, supporting learning preferences, varied experiences and cultural differences. However, it is important to ensure that all 'variations' equally complement skill development required for the successful completion of assessments.

Include students as partners in their learning to 'co-develop[] new knowledge through inquiry and problem-solving tasks', 'determin[e] assessment items' and 'review[] teaching and learning activities (two-way feedback models)'.

Technological considerations

Getting to know your student cohort is important in addressing these design considerations:
- Does your FLO site allow for students' time zones, the technology they are able to use, resources they are able to access, and internet bandwidth?
- Will a translator need to assist you with teaching (eg if your students are transnationals)? Will captions and transcripts facilitate student understanding?

Think about the big picture of overall topic design, site structure and setup before moving into activity design. When designing any time-based activities in your FLO topic, schedule them within a period of hours that works best for **all** students.

Learning and teaching considerations

What are some design principles you can use to develop and teach in your topic?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines (**Engagement**, **Representation**, **Action & Expression**) are a good starting point, as they 'offer a set of concrete suggestions that can be applied to any discipline or domain to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities.' What might these guidelines look like in your FLO topic?
- Optimise choice and autonomy, minimise threats and distractions (Engagement).
- Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas and relationships (Representation).
- Use multiple media for communication (Action & Expression).

If you consider **pedagogies**, **learning outcomes**, **assessment**, **facilitation**, **learning resources** and **scheduling** as design factors, what might a culturally responsive learning environment look like in FLO (adapted from Morong and Desbiens 2016, p. 487)?
- Invite learners to define learning goals relevant to personal contexts.
- Assess knowledge of cultural worldviews (eg self awareness and other worldviews).
- Assess communication skills (eg listening, empathy, negotiation).
- Scaffold collaborative learning skills in varied participation and group activities.
- Invite learner feedback on experience of learning activities.

Social connection/interaction is an important factor in student success when learning online. Reedy's first (of six) design principles is 'Design for social connection'. That is, '[d]esign online environments with ample opportunities for all students to make interpersonal connections with other students' (2019, p. 144). More specifically (adapted from Reedy 2019, p. 144):

- Facilitate interaction between Indigenous/international students.
- Nourish interaction at the virtual cultural interface.

What might this principle look like in your FLO topic?

- Promote positive cross-cultural interaction and collaboration (eg group work).
- Facilitate the construction of shared knowledge and understandings (eg collection building using database or glossary).
- Provide opportunities for examination of disciplinary knowledge through different perspectives and cultural lenses (eg forum discussions, document sharing and collaboration).

FLO tools to support this principle include forum (eg assign roles to encourage different perspectives), feedback/choice (eg ask a provocative question), and chat/scheduler (for online/face-to-face appointments with one or more students). You could assign students to mixed-cohort group activities to ensure sharing of diverse views.

Topic content/resources

Aim to make your topic's FLO site 'an inclusive and culturally safe space' (Reedy 2019, p. 140). When thinking about topic content/resources, you could apply the UDL guideline Multiple means of representation. For example:

- Be clear about what you expect of students (eg workload as per the Assessment policy and procedures), and specify time on task (make sure this is achievable).
- Instead of expecting students to read copiously (Reedy 2019, p. 142), mix it up with multimedia (video, audio, blogs etc).
- Support students to learn the skills of academic reading and critical thinking through modelling (eg talk it through) or collaborative exercises (students learning and sharing).

You could also apply the University's Learning and teaching principles in a number of ways, including the following:

- Invite students to suggest and/or find topic resources that are relevant to their perspectives and enrich other student perspectives – these could be added to the readings for the topic, or feature in an online discussion (forum, Collaborate) (Morong and Desbiens 2016, p. 487).
- Deliberately include resources that are not inclusive, or ask students to find examples, and collectively analyse why they aren't and why this is a problem.
- '[P]rovide opportunities for examination of disciplinary knowledge through different perspectives and cultural lenses' (Reedy 2019, p. 144).

Try to ensure that required materials are accessible and affordable for all students. The University's Incidental fees policy states that 'Charges may be made for reading material such as anthologies of required reading, and practical or lecture notes provided that their purchase is voluntary. Alternative sources must be provided in the library so that students who do not wish to purchase the compiled materials can refer to them and make their own.' Think about using University-managed electronic resources or open educational resources in the first instance.

Topic delivery

Communication will be a key part of the topic's delivery for **all** students. Some elements of successful topic delivery include teacher presence, a communication strategy for all teaching staff, appropriate choice of communication (and other) tools, and support. Stone cites Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as asking for 'spaces in the curriculum where we can be heard and where we can hear other voices' (2019, p. 6).

Teacher presence

Your social presence is critical to students' participation and learning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Reedy's study (2019, p. 140) 'stated that a high level of friendly and supportive teacher presence in the online environment contributed to their feelings of connection.'

Your topic's design and your engagement with the topic should ideally reflect 'Indigenous cultural awareness' (Reedy 2019, p. 141) through flexible approaches to assessment and inclusive dialogue.

Communication strategy

Participants in Reedy's study (2019, p. 141) stated that 'online messaging was often unclear in terms of which student group it was addressing'. Consistency of communication across the teaching team is important to avoid student confusion and/or exclusion. Online teaching team tools will ensure that all teachers in the topic are clear about how to manage and engage with a diverse cohort.

This strategy could use a range of communication tools that are University supported to meet the diverse needs of students and their preferred communication styles, whilst also enabling them to try new ways of communicating online (with support).

Support

Reedy's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants 'called for explicit guidance and instruction to be provided in the use of technology to help improve the skills needed to study online' (2019, p. 142). As with **all** students, assuming knowledge/skills is risky – to provide a safer online learning environment, it is best to 'scaffold all aspects of student learning, particularly with regard to digital skills and knowledge' (Reedy 2019, p. 142).

Another way to consider Reedy's approach (and a number of the aspects discussed above) is to determine if your topic addresses the design principles she has identified, as indicated in the following table (adapted with permission from Alison Reedy). Each of these principles can also be linked to statements in the digital learning guidelines.

Preliminary design principles	Flinders guideline for digital learning
These design principles should, ideally be included across all topics:	
1. Design for social connection Design online environments with ample opportunities for all students to make interpersonal connections with other students.	**1.6** Students have access to communication expectations and protocol for online discussions, including preferred tools and mechanisms for staff-to-student and student-to-student communication. **1.11** Students studying online have opportunities to engage in synchronous communication and have access to timely opportunities to discuss assessment tasks. **1.12** Synchronous online classes should be used if appropriate to cohort and discipline

2. Facilitate interaction between Indigenous students Include strategies that enable Indigenous students to safely identify other Indigenous students in the online learning environment and provide appropriate digital tools and spaces to facilitate these interactions.	**1.6** Students have access to communication expectations and protocol for online discussions, including preferred tools and mechanisms for staff-to-student and student-to-student communication. **1.12** Synchronous online classes should be used if appropriate to cohort and discipline
3. Nourish interaction at the virtual cultural interface Design learning activities that promote positive cross -cultural interaction and collaboration and which contribute to the construction of shared knowledge and understandings and provide opportunities for examination of disciplinary knowledge through different perspectives and cultural lenses.	**1.5** Topic coordinators draw students' attention to the endorsed acknowledgement of country in FLO.
4. Develop strong teacher presence Ensure the design and facilitation of online learning environments promotes a strong level of teacher presence that is supportive, and culturally, and pedagogically appropriate.	**1.4** Students are provided with an online welcome to the topic by the topic coordinator and/or teaching team that includes a photo, video and/or audio. **1.7** Students have access to all academic staff details, including role, contact details, availability and response times. **1.10** Students are provided with an online orientation to the topic, including clear and explicit participation expectations and a study schedule / structure / overview / plan that provides format and focus of sessions and a logical study path.
The two final principles are more aspirational and should ideally be included where possible:	
5. Integrate Indigenous and diverse perspectives in course content Include diverse and Indigenous perspectives in the learning materials.	**4.5** Students will have access to a variety of types of learning resources.
6. Make learning resources accessible Ensure that content and activities are accessible to Indigenous students in flexible ways and formats in order to minimise the costs associated with online learning and the different ways in which learners access the Internet.	**5.3** Students are provided with online activities that are suitable to the mode of delivery **6.3** Students are provided with appropriate introduction to new technologies used in the topic.

What might support look like in your FLO topic?

- Explicit instructions around resources and activities
- Links to University resources and services (see above)
- Use of University supported FLO tools
- Social presence to discover and address problems (check in)

References

Bass, Gwen & Lawrence-Riddell, Michael 2020, Culturally responsive teaching and UDL, *Faculty Focus*, January 20

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Stone, Cathy 2019, Online learning in Australian higher education: Opportunities, challenges and transformations, *Student Success*, 10, 2, pp. 1-11, August