Tip sheet – Facilitating Student-Teacher interaction in FLO

In a classroom, teachers receive constant situational and visual feedback to gauge how students are responding. However, teaching in an online environment requires us to rethink how we effectively communicate with students. We need to intentionally design online communication opportunities around multiple interfaces and communication technologies. Several of the digital learning guidelines address student-teacher interaction and this tip sheet provides some methods to increase and sustain student-teacher interaction across the semester.

Setting expectation

We all come to university with different expectations about what is appropriate communication. When we teach face-to-face, we often start by defining what is appropriate classroom communication and behaviour. Our understanding of what is acceptable online communication is more diverse than when we meet in person so it is important that we take time at the beginning of a teaching session to define when and how students can engage with us online. This can be done collaboratively, for example in an opening synchronous Collaborate session or forum, or you could pre-propose times formally to students.

There are multiple opportunities to reinforce our expectations around communication to students as per digital learning guideline 1.6.

- Using a Communications module in your topic FLO site.
- At the beginning of live online sessions.
- In opening forum posts, or forum descriptions. For examples of specific forum strategies, see FOLD (Fostering Online Discussion in Higher Education)

Online and hybrid classes are new to most of us and it's important that we approach communication collaboratively with students and teaching team members.

There is guidance for students about understanding the expectations of online participation in the Learning Online FLO site.

Creating a single source of truth – Communicating to students.

A single place for topic announcements and updates.

Even the best laid plans change, and it is critical that any changes are communicated to student in an effective and timely manner. There is a range of tools in FLO to send updates to all the students enrolled in a FLO site. It is recommended you choose one method (digital learning guideline 7.3 recommends the Announcements forum) for critical topic announcements during the teaching period and clearly communicate that to students at the beginning of the topic, for example in a Communication module in your topic FLO site.

Possible options for communicating to all Students in a FLO site include:

1. Announcement Forum – Each post creates an email to student, but students cannot respond (recommended approach in digital learning guideline 7.3.)
2. General discussion forum – Allows students to respond but doesn't automatically email them.
3. Send a FLO message to students (individual, group or all students) using the participants list

For a complete list see the communication and interaction tools in FLO tip sheet.

When you contact all the students in a topic, make sure you include instructions on how they can ask questions about the message, for example by posting in the forum, or sending you an email.

Creating a FAQ

Having a location to host answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) within a FLO site can help students to use their time more effectively by answering common topic questions with a concise answer (see digital learning guideline 7.2). The most effective online tools for an FAQ depends on the number of students and the size of your teaching team, because some FLO tools require more online interaction than others.

In providing a FAQ for students, some questions to think about are:

- What topic questions are often repeated by previous students in tutorials, forums or emails?
- Will your FAQ answer questions about how students should adapt their online communication for different sessions (eg face-to-face tutorials, online tutorials or hybrid sessions) and with different groups (eg teaching staff, whole class online sessions, student-led groups sessions)?
- How do the FAQs relate to and support other topic communication channels during key times of the semester? Are there groups of students that may have specific questions?
- Do students need to be able to search the FAQ?
- Where and when can a student pose a question if it is not answered in the FAQ?
- How are students using the FAQ?
- How and when will the FAQ for the topic be reviewed?

As a starting point, the FLO starter site demonstrates providing FAQs as a page resource within the Topic information and resources module, beneath a clear heading of 'Frequently asked questions'.

The layout of the FAQ page should be an easily scannable, numbered list of questions with short answers. Related questions can be grouped under sub-headings. The FAQ page resource can be searched by using the browser text-search features. The 'last updated' date will automatically change with every edit of the page.

To provide an opportunity for students to pose new questions, or to provide a structure or search functionality for a FAQ beyond a page resource, other FLO tools that support communication and interaction in FLO can be used to provide additional searching or structuring capability for an FAQ. Some of these tools that have been used effectively for building topic FAQs are listed below.

HTML Block can be used to display concise questions and answers, for example, the top 3 most asked questions which could be updated at key points of the semester. Students could be directed to another tool, such as a discussion forum, to pose additional questions. HTML blocks do roll over at the end of each Semester and so the questions and answers can be reused.

Glossary can be used to set up categories for an FAQ, with functionality for teaching staff to populate questions and answers, allow students to submit questions and provides search and browsing options.

Hearing from Students.

Creating a place to ask topic related questions

Forums are often the default location where students will pose topic questions (see digital learning guideline 7.1). For topics with lots of students, creating an additional standard forum and naming it 'Questions and Answers about this topic' can help separate topic questions and provide a search functionality separate from weekly module discussions. There is a specific Q and A forum type, but note that this type of forum is not suitable for this use case, as only staff can add questions and students must post an answer to a question before they are able to read other answers to that question.

A disadvantage of only using forum or announcements is that the content does not roll over into subsequent semesters as part of the FLO content rollover.

At the end of teaching, you can review this forum to select questions that could be incorporated into FAQs for next time the topic runs. You may also be able to improve your topic to eliminate the need for students to ask some of these questions.

Other tools for allowing students to ask questions are:

- Collaborate can be used to make yourself available for informal drop-in sessions with students where they can ask questions
- Feedback tool is useful for providing students with an opportunity to communicate or pose questions anonymously.
- Choice (poll/survey) tool could be used with large cohorts to allow students to vote for types of questions or answers they may find most useful.
- Dialogue tool can be used to allow a student to send a question directly to a member of the teaching team.
- Chat tool can be used to provide a synchronous question and answer session for participants who can be online at the same time. This works well with a smaller cohort.
- Scheduler tool can be used to schedule group appointments for synchronous topic Q and A session in Collaborate and chat.

Making it straightforward for students to contact you

A key part of learning is interacting with academic staff so it's important to be visible so that students feel comfortable about contacting you (see digital learning guideline 1.7). It is also an opportunity to set boundaries and assign roles to different members of a topic teaching team.

Depending on your circumstances it may be useful to set expectations around:

- Which contact method works best, email, chat, or phone.
- Response times, and working hours
- Which teaching team member will respond to certain queries (e.g. extensions)
- Direct students to FAQ tools discussed above.

Being specific about when you will respond to student questions is important because this will help students know where and how their question will be answered. e.g. I will respond to discussion forums by close of business Mon – Wed only. This can reduce students needing to follow-up and help you to manage your time online.

Sources that can provide information to students about how to contact you:

- Direct students to the Teaching Team topic block
- Use a Communication themed module in your FLO site
- Your FLO profile (your FLO profile is not topic-based so be clear if you teach multiple topics, keep your contact preferences regularly updated and remember to direct student to check here)

Regardless of the choices that you make for communicating within your topic, the key message is to provide unambiguous information about how you will facilitate communication.