Tip sheet – Supporting students to successfully engage with the topic

Who are your students? What will motivate them? What are your students' expectations? What are yours? Asking yourself these questions as you set up, redesign or simply update your topic from one semester to the next will help you to ensure that students engage with your topic in meaningful ways and achieve the topic's learning outcomes. During the teaching period, you can seek the answers to these key questions from the students themselves (as indicated below), as well as tracking student engagement with FLO, to adjust the topic 'just in time' (as you go) and continuously improve students' experiences.

It's also worth keeping in mind that '[c]ontent, curriculum and delivery need to be designed specifically for online learning; they need to be engaging, interactive, supportive and designed to strengthen interaction amongst students' (Stone 2017). Flinders' Learning and teaching principles and digital learning guidelines are a good foundation for creating and teaching in a FLO site to achieve these attributes and meet diverse student needs. The questions below are what a student might ask and seek answers to as they experience the topic from start to finish. Facilitating their interactions with your topic will heighten their engagement.

What is this topic about?

Student: What do I need to do/learn/know?

When students first access the topic, this question is probably going to direct their focus. They will look over the topic seeking key information (see below) – for example, assessment details, topic information, class schedule, weekly tasks, key dates.

Thus, important questions to ask yourself when developing the FLO site are:
- Is the navigation/layout organised intuitively (as much as possible) (Darby 2020)?
- Does it have a consistent look and feel?
- Are materials within the site accessible and inclusive, and copyright compliant?
- Is there 'at a glance' contextualisation (eg welcome video, topic site orientation video)?

You might also want to think about the instructional elements in the site.
- Are there module headings that tell students what that module is about (eg Module 1 – Orientation to the topic)?
- Is the tone of your narrative friendly and personal?
- Where there are activities and resources, is there clear guidance around what students have to do?

You may like to explore the digital learning guidelines for further guidance. To get a sense of the student experience (first impressions), preview your FLO site as a student.

What is required to do this topic?

Student: What do I need? What is available to me?

If there are necessary skills, knowledge or resources (eg academic integrity, scientific integrity, laboratory safety, evacuation, digital information literacy) required for successful engagement with the topic, make sure students are aware of them from the beginning of the semester (or the week before). Provide information on what they can do if they do not have these skills and support them to acquire them. This question relates to 'What support is available?' (below). For example, you might make engaging with the Academic integrity for students FLO site a required activity. This activity will help them reference assessment items during the topic. You may also wish to include contextualised links to the Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) resources and Library resources. You can contact the SLSS and the Library's Learning and Teaching team (via Service One) for help identifying academic and information literacy skills underpinning your topic and assessments, and for ideas on appropriate support resources that can help students develop these skills.

You will also have expectations of students, and they will have expectations of you/the topic. It's best to be clear about these and invite student input at topic commencement. It's also an opportunity to talk about student workload.

Where is the key information?

Student: What are the most important things I need to know, and where can I find them?

The FLO starter site provides a design for the layout and structure of FLO topics with the goal of presenting the key information to students in a consistent way across topics and disciplines. The starter site is configurable according to the needs of your topic and the course. Perhaps start with a conversation with your teaching team about using the starter site in your course.

You could use a welcome video/topic orientation video to talk to students about the topic. Short videos throughout the topic could explain key concepts as they arise. You could also invite feedback on whether students think these elements are easy to find/revisit (intuitive) and helpful (over the course of the topic). Their feedback will help you to improve the site (see 'How could this topic be better?' below).

If you have a topic information booklet/guide, you could unpack it into the FLO site. Alternatively, you might use a FLO book/PDF that contains basic information (eg assessment details) not otherwise available in the site. For example, add introductory text for each module (which will already have a module heading that gives context as per 'What is this module about?') or an audio/video file. The audio file could be as simple as a 2-minute clip using the FLO HTML editor audio feature, or a longer clip using other tools. If you are using multimedia, make sure it is accessible and inclusive (eg provide captions and transcripts). Whatever media you choose, the main thing is to let students know the focus for that module (what to expect).

What are the assessments?

Student: How and when will I be assessed? What do I have to do to succeed?

When developing your topic's FLO site, here are some questions you could ask:
- How will students collate evidence and make shareable artefacts of their learning?
- What built-in FLO tools could you use for assessed activities?
- How will assessment-related activities and resources connect with each other?

Apart from these basic considerations, to engage and include students try to offer flexibility around assessment tasks (eg task choices, different formats for artefacts, staggered due dates). Use Bloom's taxonomy or a similar framework to challenge students at various cognitive levels, and give them opportunities for extension work if they are interested.

One of the first things your students will want to know is what the assessment tasks/artefacts are (key information). Make sure these elements are visible and easy to find, as students will need to revisit them over the semester. The FLO starter site provides for a specific module for assessments called the assessment hub. Keep assessment extensions, feedback and grades in FLO (the central place for everything to do with assessment). Point them out to students in whatever orientation method you use. Apply a 'consistent approach to presentation of detailed assignment briefs' (Farrell and Brunton 2020, p. 6) to avoid cognitive overload.

Clearly outline the assessment methods – how they meet the learning outcomes, and how they relate to the topic content/discipline. Explain the assessment weightings (low stakes at first) and your feedback methods. What can students expect of you (eg turnaround time), and what do you expect of them (eg their response to feedback)? Finding your way at Flinders has a module called 'Getting on top of assessments' which talks about these 'must knows'.

What support is available?

Student: Who/what can help me?

Guideline 7 of the 10 National Guidelines for improving student outcomes in online learning is 'Build collaboration and teamwork across faculties, services and divisions, to offer holistic, integrated and embedded student support' (Stone 2017).One of the key areas within the digital learning guidelines is support for learning.

The FLO starter site has links to support built in. It is a good idea to be aware of the support available and to show students how to access it via your topic's FLO site (if applicable) or in the Flinders website. Support resources might be for specific software, lab induction, or placement requirements (as per 'What is required to do this topic?') or for study more generally. The Student portal is a one-stop shop for integrated services and resources.

Who is present online?

Student: Who/where are the other students? Is someone teaching me?

'Visible, meaningful engagement' makes for a better online student experience (Darby 2020). What might this look like? Staff and student profile pictures create personalisation across FLO, adding a visual to text. A weekly announcement to connect the past/current week, prompt responses to forums, provocative questions, online office hours (using the Scheduler tool), just-in-time videos, grade/return short timeframes, all contribute to online presence. A blend of synchronous (eg Collaborate virtual classroom) and asynchronous (eg discussion forum) activities will enable flexibility and inclusivity of students' preferred interaction methods and timeframes.

You can also establish teacher presence via a welcome video, relaxed but professional dialogue, and your personal approach to facilitation. 'Multiple means of interaction' are key (Farrell and Brunton 2020, p. 14). Let students know how communication will happen in the topic. Stone's research (2017) found that '"[t]eacher-presence" plays a vital role in building a sense of belonging to the learning community and in improving student retention.'

You may like to use an introductory activity ('ice breaker') and student peer-to-peer/group communication that may be linked to an early, low stakes assessment to help students get to know each other, as well as you.

What is the lived experience of this topic?

Student: How can I be involved? How will I learn? How can I help myself?

Do you give students opportunities to be partners in their learning? This approach supports Learning and teaching principle 1 ('Students are at the centre of the Flinders learning and teaching experience'). Ask students what they need, think or like about the topic at critical points using a range of communication tools in FLO, which could also include a Collaborate virtual classroom session.

Are students offered variety and choice – of content/resources, activities and assessment? Your topic can be consistent without being boring. Mix up the content and activities; for example, you could provide short videos interspersed with independent and/or groupwork activities, or websites, blogs and journal articles as readings. Variety and choice support Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines multiple means of engagement and representation. Where possible, make assessment flexible (by offering a range of options for submission e.g. video or written report or choice of questions) so students are empowered.

Do instructions and other guiding information make sense? If they do, students will not have to ask you where/what questions. As an alternative form of explanation, you could provide a 'think it through' video where you say out loud your process of thinking. Making sure the topic site is clear, consistent and logical in layout and structure will enable students to have a positive lived experience.

Are students part of an online community? Use engagement tools such as Collaborate virtual classroom, discussion forums and feedback/choice for communication (peers and teacher/s). Are they able to assess their own learning/learn from others (eg see other students' work)? Use quiz to support staged ('as you

go') learning, and self and peer assessment (through a range of tools) to enable critical thinking and constructive feedback.

Is student engagement with the topic personalised? 'Highlight students' individual experiences … students online are in different places, living different lives' (DeBrock, Scagnoli and Taghaboni-Dutta 2020). Introduce students to your own life (eg stories, professional experiences) to keep them motivated and engaged. Encourage and guide students to '[l]ook for where [they] can attach a fact/concept to something more memorable' (Furber 2020), so they can construct their own learning and meaning. Try to humanise their experience as much as possible.

Are students able to self-help? This question connects to 'How are students tracking?' Try to give students 'opportunities for skill development, confidence building and self-regulation' (Farrell and Brunton 2020, p. 16). Students will succeed in and beyond the topic if they can learn self-management skills, the student portal provides helpful links. Learning from others is a key part of this skill set, so supports an online community of learners that includes teaching staff. Checking students' understanding is vital to supporting their learning.

How could this topic be better?

Student: What can I learn from past students? What will I still need to know at the end of this topic?

The digital learning guidelines suggest the following strategies for recycling and sustaining your topic.

- Maintain a cycle of frequently asked questions (FAQ) for the topic.
- Use teaching notes/other tools to provide a consistent approach across teaching teams.
- Ask students for their feedback and input into the topic, you can do this using Active quiz.

You can also use report information to analyse how students use the FLO site.

Students will be more engaged if they can contribute to the bigger picture and know their voices are heard. They will also benefit from the experiences/input of past students. Your 'commit[ment] to continuous improvement' (Darby 2020) will inspire them. This two-way communication approach also supports students as partners in their learning.

Help them make connections between topics (if part of a course/relevant to the cohort) (Furber 2020) through the design of your topic and contextualisation (with past and future topics).

References

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