



Going Online: R(e)imagining Teaching and Learning webinar series

May – June 2020

Responses to webinar questions

Characteristics of excellent online learning

An excellent online learning experience is distinguished from a mediocre or depressing one because students:

- are excited about the offerings
- feel they understand what they are being asked to do
- find it meaningful for them
- have a sense of the presence and commitment from the academic staff
- feel they belong and are part of a significant learning community.

In that sense it resembles any good learning experience.

To build this in an online learning context, academic staff must be appropriately trained in the use of the technologies they will use. This includes the affordances of the Learning Management System they will be working with as well as access, copyright and equity issues and other primary considerations. Academic staff must also have ready access to a network of professionals to help them both with technological obstacles and with learning design issues.

Students must also be supported. A comprehensive system of technological, academic and wellbeing student support must be readily available in distance mode, and it must be obvious how to access this support. It's useful to have a 'belts-and-braces' system, where students can

access help in several different ways: for example, one page PDF guides, short how-to videos, and help lines for phone-in. There is much said about how tech-savvy students are, but that is not true for all students. In addition, large numbers of students use technology in ways that is not much help with formal learning. Students may need training in what is acceptable in Higher Education in terms of research, citations and netiquette. It can be convenient for students to have an in-unit link to library services to help with some of these issues.

In terms of the unit itself, a major distinguishing feature of excellence is interactivity. The unit coordinators must have skin in the game and they must care about the student experience just as in face-to-face teaching. A unit that consists of nothing but PDFs and assessment tasks can be a lonely experience for students. Unit staff should be 'present' in the course as friendly and responsive instructors who have important things to say and who communicate in a range of ways (see Delivery below). The unit should provide space for social learning, where students can interact and learn from each other. It should have moments for fun, maybe links to interesting or surprising 'fun facts' sites, and even bespoke games, if there is budget, or if you can find something appropriate to link to. There should be scope for frequent feedback, maybe on a discussion board, to allow academic staff to identify and respond to problems, confusion and glitches.

Resources should be interesting, varied in format and content, and appropriate to online study (see more in Delivery below). Links to virtual exhibitions, experiments or lively debates will support bespoke unit materials. It can be fun for the coordinator to post interviews of visitors (other staff, external experts, students) in brief weekly features. A combination of video, audio and written materials and synchronous and asynchronous delivery is ideal. You can't overestimate the usefulness of very simple materials: the early MOOC providers found that students loved watching short videos of the instructor writing equations on a white board (in an engineering subject) much more than just getting the final set of equations on a PDF. They reported that they loved the immediacy. Likewise, simple handouts or short videos (the teacher's helpful tips, pet hates, and teacher's basic guide to foundational principles) which are not much trouble for a subject expert to produce, can be surprisingly popular.

