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Online Synchronous Engagement

Produced by the Centre for Learning & Teaching

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With the ever-increasing demand and changes in Higher Education, online learning in some form is part of all courses. This guide focuses on online synchronous sessions and how to maximise engagement and opportunities for consolidation of learning through live activities. The guide suggests practical ideas that can help enhance the online learning experience for both staff and students.

Whether you are delivering a lecture to a large group or facilitating a small group tutorial, online engagement is important for students' retention, progression, and satisfaction (JISC, 2020; Thomson (1), 2020). The aim is to utilise the tools to increase engagement and build relationships with your students.

There are many digital tools available that can support a range of pedagogical approaches in the online learning environment (JISC, 2020). Teaching in an online space is different to a traditional face to face environment and whilst you may not be able to observe physical cues (body language etc.), engagement can still be monitored using online tools. These technologies provide opportunities to interact with your students and create stimulating and engaging activities.

Online synchronous learning works best when learners have an opportunity to participate by asking questions, sharing ideas, and receiving feedback (JISC, 2020).

Be clear about your expectations of how students should behave and interact in an online learning environment. Think about the accessibility of tools and equal opportunity for learning and participation from all students (JISC, 2020). This may vary depending on the size of the group, the mix of the cohort and access to digital equipment and connectivity. The time that students have synchronously with staff is limited, maximising the effectiveness of the time you do have online is key.

Familiarise yourself with the tools you plan to use. Think about which resources you could prepare in advance (the quizzes, video snippets or feedback on student work).

How to manage online synchronous engagement:

- Allow time for welcomes and introductions especially early in the course and at the start of new modules (to you, each other, for the session outline and the tools used for teaching). This will allow participants to familiarise themselves with the software and troubleshooting at the beginning of sessions
- Agree and establish clear expectations from the start: establish agreed ground rules for everyone (staff included). These include i) language, ii) interruptions, iii) "safe space" conduct.
- Communicate clearly about the session outline, break times and guidance for how students can ask for attention during the session and how they should interact when asked e.g. hand raising, audio only, use the chat box. Be strict with timings.
- Make the most of functions you have – utilise built-in tools e.g. chat function, voting, polling questions, annotation, microphone, video, break out rooms and screen share. This reduces the chance of students getting 'lost' moving into different spaces for different tools.
- Make it interactive, ask a question to be answered in chat, create discussion questions between peers, encourage responses using emotion icons and voting.
- Use a range of activities and chunk these as part of your session but be careful not to over-use tools to the detriment of the session plan and flow.

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- Check in with your students to ensure everyone is on track. This also allows students to voice any concerns. You can use external polling tools or in-built functions if you want students to be able to respond anonymously
- Feedback is important. Some tools can provide instant feedback e.g. quizzes, but others will require you to dedicate some time to review student responses and summarise the learning. Ensure you have allocated time for this.
- Be prepared for disruption (connectivity issues) and think about how you can handle it in advance. For example, if the video you are sharing via screen share is staggering, you can share the link in the chat function
- Minimise distractions and connectivity issues by asking all participants to turn their video and microphones off before you begin your session
- Consider recording your session, and any supplementary learning content to share before, during or after the session
- Explore assistive technology to support students. This includes screen readers, communication aids (live transcripts in O365 programmes), baked-in accessibility options in Operating Systems (audio outputs settings). Share this knowledge with the students ahead of sessions and as part of induction so they can explore what works best for them.
- Check your students' geographic locations. They may be in a different time zone and/or have a varying degree of connectivity.
- Plan your session. You will be able to prepare for your session in advance i.e., preparing quizzes, gathering your resources, and testing the tools you are going to use.
- Review your presentation design, limit the amount of text and bullets on each slide. Use high quality graphics and choose the appropriate text typeface and font size. A guide to creating accessible presentations can be [viewed here](#)
- Consider aligning the tools available with the overall learning objectives of the course i.e. are there any student presentations, peer feedback for reflections and requirements for partaking in discussions
- Encourage students to build a community online with each other. Provide signposting to guides on how they can work collaboratively outside the session. A recording of session delivered at DEAP Digital20 provides some ideas of online collaboration and community. It can be [viewed here](#)

Conferencing platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate, and Microsoft Teams are the primary platforms used for online delivery of lectures and seminars at Leeds Beckett. They have many built-in functions discussed above i.e., polling, break-out rooms, note-taking, file-sharing, whiteboards, chats etc. **IT Services and Digital Learning Service have several guides and training sessions available to help you** use these tools to their full potential. Links to this information can be found at the end of the guide.

Useful Guides and Resources to Training

[TeachLearn Guides](#) – guides for using MyBeckett, Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams and more

[LBU Development & Training](#) - Information about staff development and training sessions

[ITS – MS Teams Resource Hub](#) – for updates on new features in MS Teams and training for the tool

[Disability Services](#) - Information about assistive technology and study assistant support for students

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Bibliography and Resources

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