

Communication with Students for Engagement and Retention

How can we adapt practices from face-to-face classrooms in our virtual and online classes?

- Introductions
- Agenda for the week
- Small group discussions
- General “get to know you” conversations
- Student camaraderie

Communication and Announcements

Be PRESENT and available – establishing your personal tone and opportunities for engagement from the start goes far to developing rapport with students

- Send introductory email to students, welcoming them to the class and establishing expectations (for students and instructor)
 - Will you accept late work? Will there be penalties?
 - What is your turnaround for grading? When can students expect feedback on their assignments? Consider using audio or webcam potential for comments and feedback
 - What is the best way of contacting you? (email, phone, text, Zoom)
 - Provide contact info, and establish parameters (for example: “will accept text messages between 9am and 9pm, Monday through Saturday”)
- Identify learning goals; offer suggestions for most efficient/effective ways to move through course content
- Weekly announcements: posted in Blackboard
 - Recap previous unit and/or preview next unit
 - Provide contextual connections, different angles/lenses to think about information, points of relation, etc.
- Video announcements – similar to written announcements, more “personal” and engaging
- Optional Zoom meetings between instructor and students – either individual or group sessions – ideally, at least one hour per week for “office hours”
 - Check in points, review, study groups/tutoring
 - If email is preferred, can have similar approach – check in points, suggestions for additional review (individual or group)
 - If Zoom “office hours” are not practical, consider having a consistent time each week when you will be actively in CUW email; students can expect responses at that time, can reach you quickly by email during those hours

Discussion boards: Initiation-Response-Evaluation model

- Initiation: writing effective and engaging discussion board prompts/questions, setting expectations
 - Use open-ended questions (rather than yes/no or true/false) to encourage critical thinking and dialogue
 - “How” and “why” questions can help students dig deeper into their analysis
 - Explain/reiterate in detail what the expectations are for content of initial posts: length (ex. 250 words), format (paragraph, list of terms, etc.), citing course material or not, opinions or not, deadline for submission
 - Indicate the priorities in assessing/grading – are you using a rubric?
 - Establish guidelines of “netiquette” for professional/civil discourse
- Response
 - This is the students’ opportunity to integrate their own ideas and opinions with their classmates’, as well as with the course content
 - Explain in detail what your expectations are for content of responses to classmates: length (ex. 100 words), reflecting and adding to thoughts, asking probing questions, connecting to course content, personal evaluation or opinion
 - Respond to posts yourself! Discussions are not solely for student responses – use them as you would a classroom conversation. **NOTE: This is required - this time is part of the calculation of student instructor time, per HLC.**
 - Engage in the dialogue with the students, as appropriate – not necessarily responding to each post, but clarifying confusing points or answering questions as they arise
 - Redirect conversations if they move off-topic
- Evaluation
 - Be active when the students are – not just after all posts are completed for the week (and students might not return to read follow-up...)
 - Ask reflective questions: “Do you think that would be the appropriate action every time, or are there situations where your response might be different?”
 - Direct to classmates’ posts: “Did you see that Nancy used a similar example?”; “David mentioned another source that you might find useful”
 - If students ask questions in their posts, feel free to answer them – points of clarification, or provide additional sources (maybe a link to a helpful article or video)
 - If you do post additional content in a response, be sure to post that as a general Announcement as well (with some contextual explanation) in case students didn’t see that particular post
 - Be inclusive – try to respond to every student’s posts at least once every few weeks through the term

Content adapted from Elizabeth Barkley and Claire Howell Major, *Engaged Teaching: A Handbook for College Faculty*, First Edition (Richmond, CA: SocialGood, 2022)