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Building community and presence in digital learning environments

Colleagues have been exploring digital tools and learning environments in response to the move to digital and hybrid teaching. This has resulted in a re-think of teaching approaches as they get more of an understanding of the possibilities of teaching and learning in digital spaces. This short document provides some ideas about how you might build community and presence in the digital space to encourage student engagement. Building closer connections with students can help by providing valuable feedback about student understandings of key concepts and learning outcomes and how students are progressing with their learning.

This resource highlights some things to consider and some suggestions about building community and presence in digital environments:

- [Building student confidence](#)
- [Presence](#)
- [Learning activities](#)
- [Student engagement](#)
- [Reflecting on what works and what you can change](#)

A [list of resources](#) is available at the end of the document.

Building Student Confidence

Things to consider

Students will need guidance and encouragement as they continue to adapt to learning in a digital environment.

It's important to **be welcoming** and to **ensure support is clearly signposted**.

Set expectations for your students and **include guidance about how to engage** in the digital learning environment and **be clear about how and when they will get support from the teaching team**.

Be honest with your students and acknowledge that we're all learning and making the best of a difficult situation.

Suggestions

Point to [sources of support](#) for your students.

Include [ice-breaker activities](#) (login required). These types of activities will help to [build community and belonging](#). The University's guide to belonging provides some useful practical suggestions and advice that can help build a [sense of belonging](#) amongst students.

Provide guidance about [staying safe in the physical](#) and [digital spaces](#).

Highlight support for students to [develop their study skills](#) and point to guidance about [learning in a hybrid environment](#).

Encourage and support your students to [develop their digital skills](#). Consider how to incorporate the development of digital skills, [information and digital literacies](#) into your teaching. Here are some examples of how [Wikipedia](#) has been used to help students understand and develop information and digital literacies.

Presence

Things to consider

Presence is an important aspect of teaching in the digital environment.

- [This video](#) gives a brief introduction to the idea of presence.
- The [Community of Inquiry framework](#) provides an overview of presence and how it relates to the learning environment and the educational experience.
- Teacher presence is one type of presence and this will be experienced differently in the digital environment where the concept of contact time is likely to be less visible.

Suggestions

Some ways to help **build teacher presence**:

- Post a welcome video or set of slides to provide an overview of the course and the staff who teach or support it.
- Have regular office hours or schedule drop-in sessions for students.
- Encourage the use of profile pictures for staff and students. Using cameras may be appropriate during live sessions although this should be a choice and not a requirement.
- Include opportunities for regular dialogue and feedback with teaching staff and students.

Learning activities

Things to consider

The focus should be on what you are **trying to achieve** during your course and **how you might do this**. Then think about what tools could be used to help support your students as they work towards achieving the [intended learning outcomes](#) of the course.

Should course activities be **live** or **asynchronous**? There are advantages and disadvantages to both, and what works best will depend on the context.

Are some of your students in **multiple time zones**? Think about ways you can provide an equitable learning experience for all your students.

Another consideration is **bandwidth** which might be a barrier for your students and stop them participating in live sessions.

Don't be tempted to try to re-create on-campus activities, instead consider what **new opportunities** are offered by **digital environments**.

Suggestions

Including a mixture of activity types is a good approach. It might not be practical to re-design the entire course so keep things as simple as you can. This is a period of transition for everyone and hopefully the changes you make will help with future teaching approaches.

You might find these [examples](#) helpful for planning and structuring your course activities. They are based on the ABC course design work which incorporates [the six learning types outlined here by Diana Laurillard](#).

Take advantage of local support available to you such as your School learning technologist. They are likely to have valuable insights into what might work best in your disciplinary context and will be able to offer advice about both pedagogy and technology.

You might find it useful to look at Teaching Matters for ideas from across the University including these collated posts about [digital education](#).

Student engagement

Things to consider

Student engagement is a key consideration for any form of teaching. It is worth thinking about how you will get to know your students, and how you can encourage your students to get to know one another in a digital setting. Students report the **positive impacts** of teachers learning their name and being curious to find out about, and demonstrate, that they care about students' wellbeing and progression. Including small group work in breakout groups in live sessions, or using group discussion boards, or group projects can really help students to get to know one another in digital environments.

Designing low stakes **formative assessment activities** can help you get a sense of how your students are progressing and these should encourage students to interact and engage in peer and collaborative learning.

Suggestions

This guide provides a useful overview of how [feedback and assessment can be used to help your students engage in their learning](#).

You might also be interested in other [sources of support about student engagement](#).

The Teaching Matters site has lots ideas and [examples of assessment and feedback](#) including a spotlight series on [alternative assessment methods](#).

Reflect on what works and what you can change

Things to consider

Things might not go to plan and there are multiple factors which will influence the teaching and learning process including problems with accessing and using technology, unknown barriers experienced as a result of the physical environment, and time pressures. Each of these will impact you and your students in different ways.

This is a period of transition and we're all learning so seek help where things aren't going to plan and **share ideas** and examples of what's working with your colleagues.

Suggestions

Participate in **practice sharing events** in your School if possible.

There are a range of University wide practice sharing opportunities including [learning and teaching workshops](#) and [sharing practice initiatives](#) from IAD.

Take advantage of training available. Information about [training on using technologies for learning, teaching and assessment can be found here](#).

List of resources

How to make intended learning outcomes useful - <https://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/how-to-make-intended-learning-outcomes-useful/>.

Macro and micro patterns (course structure and learning activities) - <https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/learning-technology/learning-design/abc/macro-and-micro-patterns>.

An introduction to the 6 Learning Types (YouTube video introduced by Diana Laurillard) - <https://youtu.be/TSP2YlgTldc>.

Teaching Matters - hybrid learning and teaching - <https://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/tag/hybrid-learning-and-teaching/>.

EngagEd in...feedback and assessment - <https://indd.adobe.com/view/61f77bc4-f336-4dc7-ae23-19b904b966a0>.

Student engagement - <https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/learning-teaching/staff/student-engagement>.

Teaching Matters - assessment and feedback - <https://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/category/theme/assessment-and-feedback/>.

Teaching Matters spotlight on alternative assessment - <https://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/tag/spotlight-on-alternative-assessment/>.

IAD support for hybrid teaching - <https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/learning-teaching/support-hybrid-teaching>.

Edinburgh Hybrid Teaching Exchange - <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/learningexchange/>.