

## Know your learners

You need to understand your learners, their learning styles, and preferences. Ask the students to create a bio that may include the following:

- Preferred name
- Educational background
- Employment
- Future career goals
- Reasons for enrolling in the course
- Preferred learning style
- Some personal information
- Upload personal photo

The bio will also help others connect with them, and help create community.

## Introduce learners to each other

Use the bio described above to ask the learners to introduce each other and post their photos. Make sure they complete the bio as an assignment, where you direct them to the discussion board to answer a few questions about what they had in common with others, or who in the class has the same career aspirations as they do.

## Procedures and norms for discussion

Suggest how you are structuring the discussions, describe the norms, rules and procedures, but always give them the chance to give an input in the design through surveys. Suggestions may include:

- Appropriate length of post
- Post content
- How many replies for others to include
- Constructive suggestions to others
- Refer them to the Netiquette rules posted in the course
- Comments should lead to a discussion and not fall flat. They should be thoughtful and insightful.

## Procedures for discussion management

Instructor should manage the discussion in a way that the conversation between the students is not hindered. However, it should also be apparent that the instructor is reading the posts and he or she is offering insightful feedback. It is suggested that instructor:

- Allow the discussion to grow by not answering all posts after the second week of instruction. At first instructor needs to be present in order to guide the process.
- Participate in the discussion in general and give insights to how it is going.
- Add an insightful comment addressed to the group at the end of each discussion thread.

## Content should be free-flowing

Make sure the content is free-flowing, with flexible deadlines, without it affecting the progress of the class. You might want to connect the new comers to students who have more experience with the content through team activity and discussion moderation by the more experienced students.

## Team-building activities

Creating community in the class is crucial online. It helps reduce isolation and drop out. Students feel more productive and more willing to participate in the course if they can connect a person to the post. Forming teams could be based on:

- Common interests
- Level of experience with the content or technology
- Interest in the same topics
- Profession

You might want to mix the teams and have different students with different experiences. Team-building activities are great for creating community.

## Share course assignments

Have students share assignments with others to critique and give feedback. This activity will allow them to learn from each other and is also good at team-building.

## Create a social space

Create a forum in the discussion board area, where your students can go and socialize and share stories and experiences with each other not related to class activities. You might want to name it: “café” “Water Cooler” “Student Lounge” etc...

## **Create team projects**

Team projects help:

- Create community
- Students learn from each other
- Students gain decision-making skills, especially if the instructor allows them the freedom to set agendas and identify roles in some cases.

However, the instructor needs to provide very clear guidelines.

## **Develop asynchronous group discussions**

Always include asynchronous group discussions. Each set of readings should lead to a set of questions for the students to discuss. It also helps them synthesize the readings and gives them a chance to ask the instructor for additional information or help to clear certain points.

## **Create opportunities for learners to facilitate discussions**

Create roles in the discussion board, where you assign learners the role of facilitator. The facilitator may initiate the discussion, or may be responsible for keeping the discussion on track. Students learn best by applying what they learned and by teaching it to others. Assigning roles allows the students to take responsibility for their own learning. Make sure the roles rotate throughout the semester.

## **Add games, simulations, and fun activities**

Some activities could be to search the Internet for a specific topic and then share the results with the class. Other activities could be video clips and the students are asked to analyze, respond or comment on part or all of the video. Reusable Learning objects (simulations) are plentiful on the Internet and could be a valuable resource for your students. They are dynamic, interactive and task-driven exercises. The students learn by doing.

## **Connect students to the community**

Use outside speakers or ask the students to interview people in their community for a project. This activity will allow them to build content knowledge.

## **Create opportunities for reflection**

Use online journals to allow the learners to reflect on what they have learned.

## **Feedback**

Feedback is the most important aspect of managing the online course. Make sure you answer the emails within 24-48 hours. Make sure you give feedback on all assignments, graded and ungraded. Make sure feedback is timely, constructive, and private. Avoid general statements, and give specific feedback.

## **Motivate learners to participate**

Always encourage your learners to participate. Once students are engaged, they are more apt to complete and succeed in the course.

## **Consider online office hours**

Offer online office hours through the synchronous tool. It will give the students a chance to ask questions and makes them feel that you are available to provide assistance.

## **Consider including live chats**

Include live chats throughout the semester; make sure that they are archived and not mandatory. Make sure not to include more than 3 sessions a semester, otherwise the students feel that they lost the freedom of scheduling that the online setting affords them.

## **Continuous learning**

Take advantage of opportunities for continuous learning. Ask about the use of new technologies and whether it is good for your class. Keep up with the technology, because your audience will be.