Practical strategies for sustaining student engagement

Now more than ever, students need you to develop good online engagement strategies. Without access to on-campus classes and regular social interaction with teachers and peers, students can quickly feel isolated or disengaged. This semester, your efforts as a teacher have the capacity to make a profound difference to students’ academic progress and general wellbeing. The advice below will help you create a climate that assures students “we’re all in this together, and we can do this.”

Be present in the unit site, in some form, 3-4 times per week
Students need to know you are ‘there’. This means that you need to make your presence known through a mix of intentional strategies.

Observe and guide student activity (teaching presence)
- At the beginning of the week, post an announcement that gives an overview of the topic and activities for the week ahead. You could do this as a short video (1-3 minutes) so that students can see and hear you.
- Read and answer questions in the general unit discussion forum every 1-2 days.
- If you notice student confusion (e.g. about content, participation expectations, assessment) post a short video to the discussion board to clarify and post an announcement with a link to it.
- At the end of the week post an announcement that recaps the week, and briefly suggests how students might prepare for the following week.
- Monitor student engagement and follow up with any students who are not engaging.

Foster a learning community (social presence)
- Ask students to share their experiences of learning off-campus and share your own experiences of teaching off-campus. You could encourage students to do this in the form of a discussion board post, or via an image or Panopto video.
- Use the ‘Groups’ feature in Blackboard to divide a larger class into smaller, informal ‘study groups’ of 10-20, or show students how to do this themselves – either in a Blackboard Discussion Board or Wiki, or informally in Microsoft Teams.
- Encourage purposeful student to student interaction, for example don’t respond to every post or comment and instead direct students to consider those of their peers (e.g. “Gina makes an interesting point – what does everyone think?”)

Set learning activities that encourage students to visit the unit site 3-4 times per week
Just like teachers, students have complex, busy lives. If they have no good reason to visit the unit site, they will probably prioritise other things.
- Encourage engagement through communicating a clear set of expectations: how often should students be creating/responding to posts, completing activities, attending live online sessions etc.?
- Regularly post links to topical videos, images or websites and ask students to discuss how it relates to the course. You could also ask students to respond with their own links.
- Use open-ended questions on discussion boards: “Why do you think that?”; “What alternatives can you imagine?”; “What new questions did this generate for you?” This can encourage discussions to unfold over a period of days.
- Set simple, formative quizzes so students can check their understanding regularly.
Provide clear ‘student consultation’ opportunities

You need to find ways to replicate ‘consultation times’ online. With no office to visit, students need to know how to ask questions, seek clarification, and check that they are on track.

- Ask students to use the general unit discussion forum for all unit-related questions.
- Set ‘virtual office hours’ – fixed periods of time (e.g. 1 hour) during the week when you will be online and available for questions.
  - These could be scheduled as live sessions. Whether you use Collaborate, Teams or Zoom, record the session and post it on Blackboard for all students.
  - These could also be conducted in the general discussion board at set times.
- If appropriate, invite students to request short, individual appointments that can be conducted on Microsoft Teams, and scheduled in Outlook.

Act on student feedback from the ECU pulse survey

Taking the ‘pulse’ of students’ experience can be done at various points in the semester to get feedback on what is working well and what could be improved. During COVID-19, ECU will conduct a ‘pulse’ survey across all units to give Unit Coordinators actionable feedback on the changes they have been making to teaching and assessment. The survey will contain the following items:

- I am satisfied with the level of guidance and support I am receiving in this unit
- The assessment task requirements are clear to me
- Overall I have been able to study effectively in this unit so far
- What could be improved in this unit? [Open text]

Visibly acknowledge student feedback and explain how you will act on it. Create an announcement or a short video summarising the most common feedback (positive and negative) and how you plan to respond.

Your response might include a link to ECU support for students, where students indicate challenges with wellbeing, technology, or financial hardship.

What next?

If you are interested in exploring more strategies for engaging students, you may find the following resources useful.

Consider how the teaching strategies listed here on the left might be adapted for online.

Explore this infographic on how to Humanise your Online Class.

Watch these videos of educators talking about Engaging Online Facilitation.