

# FOSTERING STUDENT-TO-STUDENT COMMUNICATION ONLINE

## MOTIVATION

Studies have shown that students tend to learn and retain material better when given the opportunity to discuss it with classmates as opposed to just learning through lectures and readings. (The New Science of Teaching and Learning by Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa 2010).

Peer communication can increase student retention, increase engagement and build a sense of community in a course. Discussion can also offer multiple perspectives on the content and give students a chance to practice content communication which may necessary for careers in the field.



## SELECTING APPROPRIATE COURSE COMMUNICATION

Selection of the communication activities you include in your online course should depend on the nature of course material and the learning goals for the students.

In selecting course communication activities, there are several key things to consider:

- Synchronous vs. Asynchronous
  - » Will students be interacting with each other real time or will they be doing tasks and viewing each other's work at various times?
- Graded vs. Ungraded
  - » Will the communication be included as part of the grade for the course?
- Structured vs. Unstructured
  - » Will the communication have a prompt or specified task or is it a freeform environment for students to select their own topics and pose their own questions?
- Monitored vs. Unmonitored
  - » Will the instructor or teaching assistant be monitoring or participating in the communication activity or is this a space for students to work independently?

In addition, you will also want to consider whether the communication is best done with typing, images, audio, video or handwritten work. With all course elements, you want to be sure to consider accessibility issues.

## STUDENT COMMUNICATION OPTIONS

There is a wide-range of communication options in an online course. Some examples include unstructured discussion boards, prompted discussion boards, online study groups, group assignments, live webcasts, video lecture tagging, video assignments, photo assignments, and more!

## ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR DESIGNING ONLINE STUDENT COMMUNICATION

- Make sure to provide adequate instructions and training to students on utilizing course communication tools.
- Tell students in advance if they will need a webcam, headset, microphone or other piece of technical equipment for the course.
- Provide clear guidelines for expectations on conduct in discussion forums. For example, you might ask that students:
  - » Be polite and respectful toward fellow students
  - » Respect the diversity of opinions and cultures that will be present in your course
  - » Post only appropriate content (No profanity, copyrighted content, advertisements, etc.)
  - » Adherence to academic integrity standards
- Provide clear guidelines for writing style expectations in the discussion forums. For example, you might ask that students use professional writing style in the course.
- Communicate to students the degree to which you will be monitoring and participating in the various course communications.
- Whenever you have graded discussions or other course communications, be sure to provide students an assessment rubric ahead of time.
- If you monitor the discussions early in the course and provide feedback to students, it will help them improve the quality of student responses. This will also help students understand how their communication is being assessed.
- Using an open discussion board is a great way for students to answer each other's logistical questions in a timely and efficient manner.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [The 7 Cs of Effective Communication in Your Online Course](#)
- [Dennen, Vanessa. Designing Peer Feedback Opportunities into Online Learning Experiences. 19th Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning.](#)
- [Creating Effective Peer Learning Environments in Online Courses](#)