Using Online Environments to Support Engagement in Large Classes

What is it?

Large classes can be challenging for academics and students alike. Feelings of anonymity and lack of community in large classes can be discouraging and as a result, students can feel passive and demotivated. Engaging learners can be a challenge. Students are often hesitant to ask questions or make contributions in large classes, feeling unwilling to draw attention to themselves.

Using online environments, such as Blackboard and some Web 2.0 tools, can help build a sense of community among lecturers and students and help students take more control of their learning. If online environments are used during lectures they can provide opportunities to help raise engagement.

What could you do?

• In week 1 of the course introduce students to the idea of using Blackboard for the majority of course interactions. Show them the structure of your Blackboard course and establish the protocols for communication. Let them know how often you will be checking the Blackboard discussion board and remind them that emails should only be used for personal matters. Set a week 1 task in Blackboard to help students learn how to use it.

• Using questions asked in previous courses, set up a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page in Blackboard. This will help students find solutions to their most common problems.

• Use online conferencing tools like Adobe Connect to provide extra workshops outside normal lecture or tutorial times. This allows students to ask questions and also learn from their classmates’ questions.

• For courses with a laboratory component that require understanding of complex concepts prior to participation in lab work, create interactive activities (desktop recording of instructions, animations, visualisations, simulations etc.) with formative quizzes afterwards to allow students to confirm their understanding.¹ These can be placed in Blackboard and linked to discussion forums if appropriate.

• Create a backchannel in your lecture using Twitter hashtags.² A backchannel can be thought of as the interactions amongst the audience of your lecture. This can be projected on screen through your PowerPoint presentation (Windows only) and also embedded into Blackboard for review later. It allows students to ask questions, provide input and confirm concepts with each other.³ Twitter could also be used to easily share results of short, small group discussions.

• After the lecture, ask students to provide one-sentence summaries in Blackboard to review what was covered in the lecture. Students could also produce metaphors using simple movie making software, PowerPoint or Prezi online presentation software (http://prezi.com/), or even upload a single image to summarise what they learned or found most interesting in the lecture.

• Record your lectures and upload them to Blackboard. This will allow students to review lectures again in their own time and clarify any areas of confusion.

• You could also edit shorter chunks from your lecture recordings to highlight specific themes, providing discussion prompts or quizzes for deeper consolidation of learning.
**Tips**

- Connect online tasks to assessment (either formative or summative) so that students are more motivated to complete them.
- Provide orientation at the start of the semester and during semester when required to ensure students are aware of what is required of them in the eLearning tasks as well as in other course content. Try using Gilly Salmon’s ‘All Things in Moderation’ tips to help you maintain engagement in the online environment.⁴
- Let students know how often you are going to answer questions online and remind them that you will only answer personal questions via email. All other communication should be done in online discussions.
- Consider team teaching with colleagues to help reduce the workload of teaching online, and to share ideas and support each other.
- Don’t feel like you need to provide online activities all the time. Start out slowly and build up as your confidence and experience improves.
- Remember to prepare beforehand. For example, if students will need to sign up for a web-based tool to use during a lecture, ask them to do this as homework. Provide instructions in Blackboard on what they need to do and make yourself available for questions. Check if there are any AskIT guides from the Library website that you could link to.

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**What have people done?**

Professor Alan Crosky, from the University of New South Wales explains how he uses online environments for teaching large classes:

http://online.cofa.unsw.edu.au/learning-to-teach-online/ltto-episodes?view=video&video=271

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2. https://support.twitter.com/articles/49309-what-are-hashtags-symbols#