Getting to Know Your Students

Preparing to Develop and Teach Online and Blended Courses
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The challenge is simple. You have been asked, as quickly as possible, to produce an online course and you haven’t done this before.

Your instinct: take what you normally would do in a classroom and “put it online”. You have a lesson plan, you have taught the course lots of time before, so isn’t this simple?

Not really. Students in an online course are in a different learning environment (at home, Second Cup, on a train) and are expecting different things from a classroom-based course. You need to understand the experience of learning from their point of view if the course is to be successful and you are to meet their expectations. So what does this mean?

Ask yourself these questions about the students that will be taking the course:

• **When will learning occur?** At what time of the day will the students be taking the course?
• **What are their needs?** Are these different from in-class students?
• **What is their level of education?** It is important to know their academic (particularly literacy and numeracy) level, computer skills and their ability to self-manage their learning.
• **Does your audience already know something about the course content?** Check out their prior knowledge. You must be clear on what they already know, what their incoming skills are and their “desired end state.”
• **Will your audience benefit from taking the course?** Getting to know their objectives and expectations in taking the course is very important. Particularly try to understand their expectations of engagement – how will they expect to interact with you, the materials and with other students?
• **Is your audience already interested in the topic?** If you discover they are not, you have to think how to engage them.
• **What will the students be able to do with the content that you transmit through the course?** What use will they put the course to?
• **What are their expectations about assessment?** Do they expect frequent or infrequent assignments and do they expect self-assessments as well as formative and summative assessments from you?

Already, by exploring these questions, we are asking you to think in more depth about what the student experience will look like.

We know from a great body of research that the best predictor of success in your course (or any course) is the extent to which the student feels engaged.

Engagement involves these activities and carries these implications for you in thinking about your students:
• **Level of academic challenge** – how challenging are the learning activities? Do you have the right balance between challenge and competence of your students?

• **Active and collaborative learning** – Do the students get to engage with others (collaboration) and solve problems and be creative? Are you thinking about activities, not just content?

• **Student-faculty interaction** – how and for what purpose will they interact with you? What have you designed into the learning that requires and enables this interaction?

• **Enriching educational experiences** – if the student wants to pursue an idea, line of thought or develop their skills, how have you enabled this online?

• **Supportive environment** – is the course and the students’ experience one of being supportive and enriching?

These five aspects of engagement – the basis of an international study of student engagement – are key to completion rates and success for online learners. They are therefore key to you in designing your course. To be able to answer these questions about engagement, you really need to know your students.