Practical Online Facilitation Tips

To ensure a high quality learning experience for our online students, here are some important issues to consider:

1. Work on building a learning community

In the first few weeks of the study period, it is extremely important to work on creating a community of learners by encouraging students to share their thoughts and resources, as well as helping each other. If you put some effort into managing students' expectations and emphasising the importance of students working together, it is much more likely that the students will be happier for the duration of the unit, as well as more generous – towards each other and you (in eVALUate).

The only way to do it is to get involved:

**Online Discussions**

Check current discussion threads regularly and post messages in them as often as you work online. If you can only be online a few times a week, make sure students know that, so they don’t expect a response from you immediately (this comes back to managing their expectations). Just adding one message a day, or a few messages twice a week, will ensure that your students feel attended to and supported. Provision of timely and detailed answers on the whole range of unit-related questions (and studies in general) forms an important part of your role as online lecturer.

Please use online discussions for posting any resources (pdfs or other documents) that you have to offer – rather than including them in emails. Posting into online discussion boards will encourage the students to do the same, and provide an outlet for them to comment on what you have to offer – it’s not just attractive to auditors, it’s good practice.

**Your Online Contact Days**

Nominate a couple of days a week when you’ll be “present” in the unit. For example, if you guarantee that you’ll be online on Tuesday and Friday afternoons between 2 and 4pm, students are aware that any queries posted by those days will ensure a prompt response. Always encourage other students to answer questions if they can. If your online contact days change throughout the study period, please make sure you post a message to this effect on your Announcements page.

**To send or not to send? Weekly Email**

If you choose to send a weekly email, it does not have to be long or elaborate – something that will take you 5-10 minutes to write is adequate. Just a few house-keeping issues is all that is required (the topic of the coming week and why it is important/interesting/complex/worth studying, coming assignments, thank you notes to the students who have posted especially interesting materials, etc.). The students generally appreciate a weekly email because it helps to remind them of what they have to do and where they should be with their studies. On the other hand, a number of lecturers very successfully use their general (or feedback) discussion to do the same. As long as you keep students informed and feeling connected, it does not matter how you do it.

2. Get ready to facilitate content discussions

While it is great if you are quick to handle any questions asked, this is not what the students are here for – they are here to learn from you, the subject matter expert, and their peers. The students need you to facilitate, guide and round off content discussions.
Hence, your tasks for “scheduled” (assessable) content discussions should include regular facilitation either through general type of postings – e.g., “these are the issues that have been raised so far...” – or through replies to a number of topical individual student postings. Try to ensure that discussions are lively, inclusive, and that no important issues are missed.

Facilitating does not mean jumping in to answer every student question – sometimes it means stepping back and letting other students answer, sometimes it means asking if other students have different perspectives, sometimes it’s more appropriate to have students reconsider an issue in a different way. Your role is to guide, not to tell students all the answers.

After the discussion is closed, it helps to post a summary of what transpired (this is a great feedback mechanism), and also give the students individual marks for their contributions to the discussion.