



# 7 Steps to: Supporting students in online learning

## Overview

Online learning takes many activities previously facilitated on campus in a classroom, laboratory, studio space, workshop, or in group learning spaces, such as the library, into the digital learning environment (DLE). Many programmes have increasingly used a blended approach incorporating learning activities on the physical campus and in the digital environment, since the early 2000's. However, COVID19 rapidly accelerated the shift from physical to entirely digital learning environments (Tesar, 2020:556). This shift requires use of a full set of digital tools that enable whole programmes to be taught online.

Prensky (2001) introduced the term 'digital native' espousing the notion that all post-millennial students are digitally literate and suited to online learning simply because they have been exposed to digital technology since birth. He also suggested that they were excellent multi-taskers. Kirschner and Bruyckere (2017) debunk Prensky's theory stating that the 'information-savvy digital native' is a creature of myth. Several studies indicate that whilst student may have high frequency use of digital technologies, the range of technologies used is often very limited (Bullen, M., et al., 2008; Margaryan et al., 2011). In addition, neurological studies (e.g. Dux et al, 2006), indicate that the brain does not multi-task, it simply switches between tasks thereby reducing focused concentration that is necessary for in-depth study.

Therefore, academics cannot assume that students will effortlessly engage with online learning. Kirschner and Bruyckere (2017) suggest that students need guidance and support to navigate their way around the digital environment. They also propose that academics should adapt resources and 'chunk' (Gray, 2015) them to enable students to complete one task before they switch to another. This 7 steps guide identifies useful strategies to support students' learning in the digital learning space.

## 1. Help students to understand what online learning is

Explain what online learning looks like in your programme e.g. *Each week you will complete the following tasks: read 2-4 targeted articles/chapters; watch 8-12 short pod/vodcasts; undertake 2x prep tasks; participate in 2x 90 minute live (synchronous) classroom activities; self-directed study focusing on consolidation of learning; assessment preparation; FAQs and touch base.* Take time to explain the timetable and how students can plan their self-directed study time. This will be a new approach for many students, as school timetables are often teacher-driven and packed with classroom activity, whereas a significant portion of the Higher Education experience is learner-driven, self-motivated study. Refer students to online learning support materials such as [LinkedIn Learning](#) and [Learning Development](#) resources.

## 2. Indicate what technical hardware and software students might need

Refer students to the university's [technology hardware recommendations](#). Digital equity (Willems, 2019) and socio-economic hardship, are significant issues in the age of online learning. Provide information about '[Access to learning technology](#)' grants, which enable students with limited finances to buy relevant hardware. There are also disparities in digital connectivity across the South West region (FRAC, 2019) creating issues around synchronous activity and upload/download speeds, which may limit remote access for some students. Provide useful links to guidance such as [Ofcom's top tips to maximise broadband speed](#). Explain what kit is available on the university campus for students to use and how they can [find and book use of open access PCs](#). Give links to useful websites/tutorials such as [LinkedIn Learning](#) that will help students to get started with some of the most used software on your course.

## 3. Develop a consistent structure and clean-looking module sites

An effective learning platform borrows many features from good website design, and good design is a pre-requisite for engagement (Taylor, 2011). The relevance and usability of a site determined, by look, feel, content and navigability 'has the potential to influence how one spends his or her time, which products one chooses to use, and also one's emotional state' (Porter and Miller, 2016:2). Make it easy for students to engage by providing a consistent structure and intuitive navigability across the digital platform at programme and module level (Hernández et al, 2009). Avoid clutter, use a simple colour palette, stick to one sans serif font, and adopt the keep it short and simple (KISS) strategy for key information on the landing pages. Ensure that students can reach detailed information and guidance within 3 clicks, and that every link is live and relevant (Porter and Miller, 2016).

## References

- Alexander, G. (2000). "Netiquette, or the social conventions of computer conferencing: Extract from a Communications Guide." from <http://sustainability.open.ac.uk/gary/netique.htm>
- Beetham, H. and R. Sharpe (2007). "Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age: designing and delivering e-learning." London, Routledge.
- Bullen, M., et al. (2008). "The digital learner at BCIT and implications for an e-strategy. Researching and promoting access to education and training: The role of distance education and e-learning in technology-enhanced environments." Research Workshop of the European Distance Education Network (EDEN).
- Colvin, J. W. (2007). "Peer tutoring and social dynamics in higher education." *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 15(2): 165-181.
- Dux, P. E., et al. (2006). "Isolation of a Central Bottleneck of Information Processing with Time-Resolved fMRI." *Neuron* 52(6): 1109-1120
- FeelingPeeky <https://www.feelingpeaky.com/9-principles-of-good-web-design/>
- Goldstein, A. (2018). "Professors are people too." *The Statesman*. Available at <https://www.sbstatesman.com/2018/04/22/professors-are-people-too>.
- Gray, C. (2015). "Designing Online Education for Work Based Learners: Refining Bite Sized Learning." [Online], Abertay University.
- Hernández, B., et al. (2009). "Key website factors in e-business strategy." *International Journal of Information Management* 29(5): 362-371.
- Kirschner, P. A. and P. D. Bruyckere (2017). "The myths of the digital native and the multi-tasker." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 67: 135-142.
- Laurillard, D. (2002). "Rethinking university teaching: a conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies." London, Routledge.
- Liu, Z. (2005). "Reading behavior in the digital environment." *Journal of Documentation* 61(6): 700-712.
- Margaryan, A., et al. (2011). "Are digital natives a myth or reality? University students' use of digital technologies." *Computers & Education* 56(2): 429-440.
- Porter, T. and D. R. Miller (2016). "Investigating The Three-Click Rule: A Pilot Study." *Midwest United States Association for Information Systems (MWAIS)*.
- Prensky, M. (2001). "Digital natives, digital immigrants." *On the Horizon* NCB University Press, 9(5), 1e6. Available at: <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>.
- Salmon, G. (2013). "e-tivities: the key to active online learning." Abingdon, Routledge.
- Swan, K. (2002). "Building Learning Communities in Online Courses: the importance of interaction." *Education, Communication & Information* 2: 23-49.
- Taylor, A. (2011). "Good website design – not just a pretty face." *In Practice* 33(9): 486-489.
- Tesar, M. (2020). "Towards a Post-Covid-19 'New Normality?': Physical and Social Distancing, the Move to Online and Higher Education." *Policy Futures in Education* 18(5): 556-559.

## 4. Front-load digital literacy skills and netiquette

Make these integral to your programmes and build discipline specific tasks around the core pieces of software that you use. The notion of the information-savvy 'digital native' is somewhat misplaced (Kirschner and Bruyckere, 2017), so introduce one piece of software at a time, with clear guidance. Invite the experts such as your information specialist or subject librarian to assist you with specialist software. Establish online etiquette, or netiquette (Alexander, 2000) at the start, so that students (and staff) are aware of the ground rules such as, muting the microphone when other people are speaking, dressing appropriately (so no pyjamas!), and staying on topic in the chat space. Refer students to helpful [netiquette guidance](#).

## 5. Communicate and have regular open-tutorials!

Clear, concise communication is key to effective support. Remember that reading strategies in the online environment differ to the immersive way we read books and articles. In the online environment we scan, search for key words and are often non-linear (Liu, 2005). Too much info, lots of extraneous words and constant email traffic are unhelpful. Concentrate on essential information, keep it short and put it where all students can see it on course sites. Identify regular online tutorial times and ways that students can access these. You may choose to have an open Zoom Meeting where students can 'pop in', a live discussion board for each module, or short online tutorial slots which small groups or individuals can book into.

## 6. Create learning communities

Physical classrooms bring people together and encourage socialisation which enhances the learning experience. In the online environment we need to work a little harder to achieve this (Swan, 2002). Use ice-breakers to help students get to know each other (see [ED website](#)). Design e-tivities (Salmon, 2013) that engage students in discussion, debate, and creation of ideas (Laurillard, 2002). Set group tasks and encourage peer learning (Colvin, 2007). Create live links to the NUS social offer and support. Encourage students to use social media to communicate with their peers.

## 7. Develop your own digital competencies for the 21st Century learning environment

The online learning experience will be better for students if the activities are properly designed for the digital learning environment and the technology is comprehensively tried and tested before it goes live (Beetham and Sharpe, 2007). If you know what you are doing, you can offer clear guidance thereby minimising potential technical issues for your students. Invest some time in identifying useful software and learning how to design effective resources. Check out the support @ [Digital Education](#) and the [Education Commons](#). Remember the principle aims are to teach and learn, the technology is simply a means by which we do this. Avoid gimmicks, keep it simple, make your resources and approach look professional, and ask students to feedback on what they like, what they find confusing and what they would suggest to improve the DLE. Finally, don't be afraid of the occasional technical glitch – it's good for students to know that their lecturers are human too (Goldstein, 2018)!

## Educational Development (ED)

The university is committed to providing information in accessible formats. If you require this publication in an alternative format, please contact [ed@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:ed@plymouth.ac.uk)

To see other titles in the 7 Steps series go to: <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/about-us/teaching-and-learning/guidance-and-resources/7-step-series>

