Blended Learning at the University of Plymouth

Academic Year 2020/21

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH | S1+

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Overview

Transitioning to online delivery requires a coherent approach to programme, module, and session delivery. To ensure that you feel confident, competent and supported and our students are able to access and engage with high quality learning it is necessary to consider how we approach our digital content and develop resources and experiences that are engaging, interactive, linked to each other and to face-to-face content, and take into consideration the specific needs of learning in an online environment. The following guidance has been developed to support you to achieve this.

General considerations for blended learning

- All programmes should have an element of face-to-face provision for all students in all stages

- Move predominantly didactic sessions to pre-recorded digital content

- Prioritise face-to-face time for interactive and experiential learning

- Provide mixed formats of learning to better support student engagement

- Synchronous sessions should be used for interactive learning, discussion and consolidation sessions, and to support group work

- Provide additional resources online for asynchronous consolidation

- Break synchronous sessions into smaller chunks with associated tasks for student active engagement

- All synchronous sessions over an hour should have built in break times

- Synchronous online sessions must be timetabled in advance

- Keep it simple. Focus on using technology to support learning rather than the other way around and make sure that you and the students are comfortable with the format. Simple does not mean ineffective.

- Build in opportunities for feedback, both on learning content, but also on the mechanism of learning. Adapt and respond to the feedback where possible.

Guidance

Depending on the number and type of sessions you will be moving to online delivery, you will likely approach this in different ways. If you are converting a few individual sessions, the below guidance will help you decide on the most appropriate format and help you get the most from those sessions. If the majority of a module/programme is being converted, or you wish to have a more coordinated approach further resources have been developed to support you. See Module and Programme Design.

Transitioning to blended learning

Delivering blended learning requires teaching and learning in classroom as well as digital environments. However, student engagement in both traditional and digital environments depends on good pedagogy, clear communication, great content, and opportunities to interact with peers and the lecturer. Through these provisions and interactions, a module level learning community can be cultivated which can work effectively across a range of environments. There are some basic principles and practices that underpin student engagement and the foundation for learning communities.

Adopt an active blended learning approach

Active blended learning is a pedagogical approach that combines sense making activities with focused student interactions (with content, peers, and tutors) in appropriate learning settings, classroom and digital environments. Active blended learning engages students in knowledge construction, reflection and critique, the development of learner autonomy and the achievement of learning outcomes. For a pictorial depiction of how this process supports curricula [click here](#).

Design an informed blended offer

Successful blended teaching and learning require a focus on what may best be done on campus, such as face-to-face interaction between students and teachers, and what is best be done online, such as providing flexibility and access to resources and experts. This requires a re-thinking of teaching and learning practice, as well as classroom sizes and layouts, as more interaction takes place, involving the students, teachers, and other stakeholders who participate in-person or virtually. The UoP offers guidance on how to design blended curriculum through using an abridged ABC methodology. [Click here for details.](#)

Acknowledge multiple forms of engagement

Engagement is [multi-faceted](#) and incudes emotional, social, cognitive, collaborative and behavioural aspects all of which should be addressed in a blended learning delivery.

Use good pedagogic principles

A move to blended delivery should still be based on [constructive alignment](#) and [active learning](#). Make [learning outcomes](#) clear to students and focus on getting students 'doing' learning as this remains central to the learning experience.

Return to learning outcomes

Embed learning outcomes clearly and iteratively into content so that students are consistently aware of how they are developing knowledge and skills in relation to them over time and across the blended learning environment.

Clearly communicate module information and provide a roadmap within the blended learning environment

Clearly communicate all aspects of module information and activities.

Create a clear roadmap of events and activities which is housed within the core learning platform. Provide weekly updates and regularly check with students they understand the roadmap.

Checklists can help students to acknowledge their own learning development and for the lecturer in monitoring progress.

Clearly communicate all aspects of module information and activities.

Acknowledge that online learning is different

Direct students to resources such as the Plymouth Student Learning online learning resource or the Remote Learning Guide by Sheffield Hallam so they know what to expect from learning in an online environment and have strategies to help them cope with learning independently.

Offer students the opportunity to express anxieties about learning in a blended/online environment. This can be anonymous and done within Moodle via a poll or anonymous discussion board. Highlight the resources and support available to students to help them with this transition. The Student Learning team can help students develop the skills and strategies needed for learning at university.

Diversity in pedagogic approach

Diversity is key to a quality blended offer. Use a range of resources and pedagogies across the classroom and digital environment to maintain student engagement for example, video, podcasts, audio, text, demonstrations, and discussions.

Support with developing online teaching and learning

The UoP Professional and Student Support Services provide support to academics and students for moving to a quality blended learning delivery. These services are the Library, Student Learning, Digital Education and Educational Development. Check out the UoP Education Commons resource for pedagogy specific guidance and support for example on practical learning, fieldwork, and student placements. The UoP subscribes to LinkedIn Learning which is an online training library featuring a wide range of video-based courses dedicated to specific skills, subjects and software which can support both academic and student's development. Further afield the sector is offering fantastic and free academic development opportunities in blended delivery. The Open University's 'Taking Your Teaching Online' course offers guidance on digital tools, selecting technologies, support networks and accessibility in digital environments. The Association of College and University Educators provides an excellent and very accessible 'Teachers Toolkit' with helpful talking heads on welcoming students, managing online presence, planning sessions and engaging students'. More generally many Universities have developed Teaching Continuity Sites which offer guidance on pedagogy, technologies and, in cases discipline specific learning.

Which technology should I be using?

The technology you choose to support teaching and learning will be partly dependent on provision and partly on what will best support the learning outcomes of your module.

In terms of provision the UoP has a suite of education technologies at its disposal including Zoom for webcasting, Panopto for screen casting, PebblePad for reflective activities etc. The UoP Teaching Continuity resource presents details of how to apply these technologies in practice and Durham University has a useful Zoom/Teams comparator guide to ascertain applicability in a given context. In considering applicability to support learning outcomes UWSW provides comprehensive guidance on selecting technologies using two complementary approaches. (i) Providing examples of learning outcomes, the kinds of learning activities that could achieve those outcomes, and how those activities could be supported by various learning technologies, and (ii) examples of the tools you may be interested in using and the types of activities and learning outcomes that are likely to be relevant.

It is important that the technology you use is appropriate and not to overwhelm students with too many platforms. Ideally multiple methods of communication should be streamlined to as few as possible, each ideally having a single purpose, and both student and staff expectations regarding engagement and responsiveness for each should be managed and outlined clearly. Keep it simple and build your own and students' awareness of platforms over time.

Synchronous versus Asynchronous delivery?

Choosing an alternative to a face-to-face session can be a complex challenge, and can leave many confused and ensure how best to provide the content. It's important to think about the aim of the session and how the students can get the most from the content. Is the session mostly didactic and about knowledge content? Will the students benefit from having this asynchronously to work on in their own time? Can you use synchronous time to provide more conversation with students? E.g. a Q&A session to accompany a pre-recorded lecture, or an interactive group work session.

Don't fall into the trap of just moving your existing sessions online, unless this is the best format. It is much more difficult to lecture into a computer screen with little feedback from muted students whom you cannot see. It is also much harder for students to focus on digital sessions and remain engaged.

Consider 'chunking' longer sessions into short pre-recorded podcast style bursts. This enables the students to not only split their learning into feasible chunks, but also helps them to identify the main concepts.

If you are running synchronous sessions, consider using the technology to support the students' learning, e.g. breakout rooms and virtual whiteboards.

Synchronous delivery

Synchronous online sessions are best suited for	Open or scaffolded opportunities to seek support or clarification regarding course materials or assessments. Consolidation of course content via peer- or tutor-mediated discussions.
Advantages/ disadvantages of synchronous sessions	**Advantages of Synchronous Teaching** 1. Immediate personal engagement between students and lecturer, which may create greater feelings of community and lessen feelings of isolation 2. More responsive exchanges between students and lecturer, which may prevent miscommunication or misunderstanding **Disadvantages of Synchronous Teaching** 1. More challenging to schedule shared times for all students and lecturers 2. Some students may face technical challenges or difficulties if they do not have fast or powerful Wi-Fi networks accessible 3. Social and academic networking opportunities. 4. Development of collaborative skills during small-group activities.
Technical considerations in synchronous sessions	There are different technologies available to run synchronous sessions including Zoom and Teams. Durham University has a useful Zoom/ Teams comparator guide to ascertain applicability in a given context. When screen-sharing as part of a lecture, be mindful to shut down programs that may use pop-up messages and notifications Recording sessions can be useful but be mindful to tell students you are doing so and how the recordings will be stored/ shared
Spacing and delivery in synchronous sessions	Break synchronous sessions into smaller chunks with associated tasks for student active engagement All synchronous sessions over an hour should have built in break times Synchronous online sessions must be timetabled in advance

Synchronous delivery

Engage students in synchronous online sessions by	**Keeping numbers low** - Having lots of students in a synchronous session can be detrimental to achieving the social and collaborative purpose of synchronicity **Clearly** flipping content – Setting expectations and clear instructions about what students should already have done/ know/prepared before attending the synchronous session. **Using** breakout rooms - In synchronous digital environments only speak for half the time. Make sure students can engage with you and with each other. Set questions/ tasks and use the breakout room function to get students working in smaller groups. Groups of 2-5 allow everyone to contribute, at least in principle. Consider asking each group to assign a lead and to document their work in pre-made online shared documents, one per group. Keep multiple tabs open to monitor progress and even communicate synchronously via chat. **Doing live** 'board work' - There is whiteboard functionality in Zoom. Alternatively experiment with the annotations tool or share a camera input. Where appropriate capture whiteboard outputs via screenshots to distribute post class. **Encouraging** feedback - Enable non-verbal feedback during synchronous meetings. Icons to communicate yes/ no/ slower/ faster/ agree/ disagree/ clap etc can be useful to gauge student interaction without disrupting the flow of the session.
Lecturer presence in the synchronous online environment	A simple but useful technique to encourage a sense of 'presence' is speaking to the camera rather than to the faces on the screen. This means that you are addressing individuals using eye contact. As tutors assume the key supporting role, it is a very useful means of creating a sense of proximity and is particularly valuable in tutorials. Zoom presents students' names - ask students to use names they would like to be called and use their names hen appropriate during the session. If using break out rooms visit student groups during breakout sessions.

Asynchronous delivery

Use asynchronous online environments when…	When deciding what material/ activities should be delivered asynchronously consider these questions. What content from a standard lecture can/should only be delivered by a lecture format? What content is foundational/background knowledge or revision that might be better shifted to self-paced pre-reading or other activities? What content might be better consolidated as post-lecture readings or extension materials, self-paced formative activities, low-stakes summative assessments, peer to-peer small-group discussions, or facilitated seminars and Q & A sessions. For content that can and should only be presented in lecture-form, consider how best this may be broken-up to balance overwhelming students with numerous small recordings, sacrificing engagement with extremely lengthy recording, and/or making long recording inaccessible to students with streaming/bandwidth limitations. 20 minutes per podcast or video resource is the upper limit in online activity. If visual content on slides is not used for active demonstrations in a recording, some students may benefit from copies of slides and the option of an audio-only recording to minimise cognitive and technological demands.
Advantages/ disadvantages of asynchronous sessions	**Advantages of Asynchronous Teaching** 1. Higher levels of temporal flexibility, which may simultaneously make the learning experiences more accessible to different students and also make an archive of past materials accessible. 2. Increased cognitive engagement since students will have more time to engage with and explore the course material. **Disadvantages of Asynchronous Teaching** 1. Students may feel less personally exchanged and less satisfied without the social interaction between their peers and instructors. 2. Course material may be misunderstood or have the potential to be misconstrued without the real-time interaction.

Asynchronous delivery

Spacing and delivery in the asynchronous environment	Space material – this means building diversity into student learning activities through engagement in different resources and encouraging students to return to activities at different points during their learning (see also spiral curriculum).

Split up asynchronous material into bite-sized chunks of learning that go over the same material but are delivered in different formats, for example, videos, audios, scenarios, case studies, simulations, and short readings. This means that when students have ten minutes, they can access a learning activity on their phone, tablet, or computer.

How long do you expect students to spend on each asynchronous activity? Be mindful that if activities are removed from the constraints of a timetabled class, it can be easy to overload students with content. It can be helpful to suggest how long learning activities will take (podcast 20 minutes, contribute to a discussion 10 mins, write a reflective account, 30 mins) although this is difficult to predict with reading tasks. |
| Engage students in asynchronous online sessions by using | **Peer and Group work**

Peer interaction is key to student engagement. Groupwork in any environment should adhere to good groupwork pedagogic principles. In asynchronous group work communication and clarify are key to good outcomes.

Create learning activities that students can do in pairs or small groups that gets them producing and/or evaluating content, connecting with others/ organisations/ knowledge and/ or collaborating through discussion forums or group projects. Students may use their own platforms for communication but specify which platform group outputs should be presented in.

If using groups, provide students with guidance for how to be a successful group member. It can be helpful to allocate group membership, to set up expectations around the time investment required and provide group members with roles and responsibilities.

Break up the group tasks into discrete tasks to make it easier for students to manage deadlines and for lecturers to check on progress.

Consider making participation in the group part of the purpose of the group activity and ask students to reflect on this in a formative reflective piece. If the group is to be assessed be clear on how individual contributions will be graded.

Teams, One note and PebblePad all have useful functionality to support groupwork.

If your programme has PALS, be sure to include your Academic Coordinator in the programme discussions around peer learning. They have regular contact with PALS leaders and are able to help you identify where and how students are learning successfully with their peers. |

Asynchronous delivery

Engage students in asynchronous online sessions by using	**Discussion Forums** Discussion forums are easily created in Moodle. Discussion forums tend to be inclusive, as they allow for flexible participation and students have time to consider and create their contribution. Use structure and prompts to get discussions going and be sure to make your presence in the discussion evident. Discussion forums require careful management to be successful. Stanford University provide helpful guidelines for enhancing online discussions. If assessing participation in discussion forums create and communicate a clear assessment rubric. **Polls** Use poll answers adaptively to meet students where they are: Questions with right answers (e.g. "Could this have been caused by glaciation?") allow you to determine if you can move on or not, while open-ended questions (e.g. "Did you find Dr. Rosling's presentation persuasive?") can set up peer debates, fishbowl discussions, or breakouts. **Other activities** There are lots of additional possibilities for asynchronous online activities. Xerte is a learning object creation tool that can be used to create online resources. HP5 is an interactive plugin installed into Moodle that allows you to develop interactive and engaging content for your students. TurningPoint and Mentimeter are interactive polling software that allow instructors to ask questions, track participant progress and receive instant feedback. The Blended Futures site hosts lots of ideas for creating asynchronous activities including escape rooms and using TEAMS for blended learning. The Education Commons hosts examples of blended learning within different pedagogical settings including practical, fieldwork and placements.
Lecturer presence in the asynchronous environment	Lecturer presence is key to engaging students, student feel more connected to lecturers who communicate with them both synchronously and asynchronously. Read up on lecturer presence and how to do it well. Try Jinhyan Fu's 5 principles of lecturer presence: videos of the lecturer, interactive syllabi, participation in online discussion, prompt and timely feedback and regular synchronicity. Enhance presence by creating an introductory video of yourself to embed in the induction, make clear 'office hours' when you can be contacted by students, provide daily / weekly updates and engage in cohort level feedback on some of the activities students' participate in. Be approachable and engaging and a supportive tutor. When possible, the instructor should be visible in recorded content. Even a still image of the lecturer can help give students a strong sense of community. Be present in discussion forums by providing prompts and summaries that are accessible to all students.

Assessment and feedback

Assessment and feedback are important drivers of student learning and key to student engagement. It is particularly important to consider assessment and feedback in the context of blended learning, not only because some assessment formats may change, but also students will be engaging with their feedback in unfamiliar ways, and may have less opportunity for the informal 'check-in' feedback that they would receive during teaching sessions or in opportunistic moments. It is more important that we build in specific, additional feedback mechanisms to support our students to develop in their learning.

Formative assessment and feedback is a useful way to interact with students and to maintain an overview of progress. Build in opportunities for small scale, low stakes formative assessment and feedback throughout the module/programme. Encourage peer and self-assessment and underpin your assessment with inclusive design principles.

Use authentic assessments that allow students to demonstrate performance in an applied context.

Provide feedback which supports students to further their learning. There are various digital tools which can help you provide feedback, so make use of them where appropriate e.g. audio, video feedback, Moodle Turnitin Feedback Studio etc.

Refer to the UoP pages on Assessment for general guidance and the Education Commons for examples of assessment in blended learning environments.

Supporting online learning with additional resources

LinkedIn Learning offers disciplinary content and skills development resources that can support student learning. There are several Open Resource disciplinary repositories to draw on and several eminent libraries have Open Access functions. The Open Educational Resources website provides access to teaching, learning, and research materials that have been released into the public domain or are under a Creative Commons license, it is easily searchable by subject area. MERLOT is an academic community of content experts who support and curate discipline content, academic teams that support institution-wide academic programs, and institutional partners. Their index is searchable. Box of Broadcasts is an on-demand TV and radio service for education. University of Plymouth staff and students can record programmes from over 65 free-to-air channels and search the archive of over 2 million broadcasts. UNESCO have developed a repository of collaboration platforms, digital content tools and distance learning solutions. Google has teamed up with over 2500 museums and galleries including the Guggenheim and British Museum to provide virtual tours. For guidance specific to assessment, practical learning, fieldwork, and placements please visit the UoP Education Commons.

Reflect on your digital capabilities

The discovery tool is a developmental tool that students and staff can use to self-assess their digital capabilities, identify their strengths and opportunities to develop their skills further to enhance their practice of learning. It uses a series of reflective questions that relate to the Jisc framework building digital capabilities: the six elements defined.

Specific considerations

Accessibility: The Teaching Continuity site provides advice on creating accessible media, written and extension activities/ resources to support blended delivery.

For written delivery: Create an overview document which provides students with a route map of resources and how/ in which order to access them. Maintain basic good practice around aesthetics. Take a simple and standardised approach to formatting. Use alt tags, where appropriate. Choose file formats that allow manipulation of text.

For media sources: Strive to use video with captioning. Avoid video with extreme flashing or strobing effects. Take steps to reduce file sizes, in anticipation of internet strain. Podcasts are quick and easy but try to provide a transcript. Durham University provide guidance on creating inclusive powerpoints

For extension activities: Set extension activities that involve student communication/collaboration. Set short, easily digestible extension activities. Mapping Access suggest a range of accessible teaching options for extension activities.

Transcripts and captions

Sessions that are pre-recorded in Panopto can have captions added and a transcript produced automatically. This is about 80% accurate, and they will need some editing prior to release. Captions help not only students who are hearing impaired, but can also make it easier for others to focus on the content. For live sessions, meetings in MS teams can be live captioned, and though this isn't perfect, goes some way to improving accessibility to these sessions. If you are running a live sessions please consider providing a transcript following the session, or at the minimum a summary document outlining the important learning.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is multifaceted and is in the academic environment is intersected by accessibility, pedagogy, and content. Consider how inclusivity issues are manifest in your own context. Use resources such as the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines, the UoP Education Commons and Teaching Continuity resources to support this.

Timetabling and Sequencing

Pay careful attention to the timetable and make sure that face-to-face and synchronous digital sessions aren't timetabled consecutively. Students will need to find space to engage with online sessions, and particularly whilst capacity on campus is tight this is likely to be in their accommodation. Equally, running an online session may cause digital fatigue (see below), so consider the sequencing and order of the sessions too e.g. if there a logical flow and what the most appropriate points might be for more interaction.

Digital Ground Rules

Consider discussing digital ground rules at the start of the session. Do you want students to mute their microphones, turn their cameras on or off (see below), raise their hands in person or digitally or not at all? What is the aim of the session, and how you can ensure that the digital delivery enhances rather than detracts from this? What are the ground rules for the use of private/open chat, if you decide it is a feature you want to use? How might you moderate this, so that it doesn't get overwhelming (e.g. in a larger group) and/or detract from the core content? LINK to UoP guidance on student etiquette in online synchronous teaching sessions.

Camera & Microphone Use

The use of cameras in sessions can be a complex issue. Some students may feel uncomfortable letting others see their living spaces and should have the option to use alternative backgrounds. Others may feel more anxious using the camera, and wish to keep it switched off. Discuss this with your students and find a way that the group feels more comfortable. For some students, it can be daunting to speak up when cameras are either on or off, and this may reduce engagement from students. Find ways to support engagement in sessions in other ways to supplement that use of the camera where needed, and particularly in larger sessions where the images cross the screen

Digital Fatigue

Digital sessions can be more fatiguing than face-to-face and require more constant attention to interpret meaning with less non-verbal communication. Think about the length of sessions and build in breaks. You may also want to advise students to turn off their cameras for short periods during longer sessions when they are playing a more passive role to allow them to take a cognitive break.

Consider regularly summarising the main points/content to reinforce and highlight the learning and core messages.

Think about the speed and tone when delivering sessions online, ensure that others are still following along with you, and provide opportunities to stop and recap or ask questions.

Support for Module and Programme design

There are additional resources to help support a programmatic approach to digital delivery. Additional resources have been developed to facilitate your team to reimagine modules for coherent digital delivery.

The Library and Educational Development service offer support in developing a quality blended teaching and learning offer. The Digital Education team provide a broad range of guidance and workshops on how to use teaching platforms and technologies effectively. Additional workshops and Q&As are also being provided during the summer to support staff in the use of the DLE (Moodle), Panopto and Zoom for both synchronous and asynchronous teaching delivery. Educational Development have launched a digitalised blended learning design process called ABC that module teams can use to move learning that would normally take place in a classroom into an online environment. Together these services have collaborated to create a new resource, the 'University of Plymouth Education Commons' which is dedicated to promoting best practice an innovation in blended learning to support the University's progress towards 2030. For support in Digital Education or ABC please do get in touch directly with the teams (digitaleducation@plymouth.ac.uk / ed@plymouth.ac.uk).

The Open University offer an open access course suitable for higher education educators. 'Open Learn: Taking Your Teaching Online'. The course entails 24 hours study in which it introduces participants to cutting edge research, the ideas and tools that shape how to teach and learn online and new ideas for your own practice.

Future Learn offer a range of short, informative courses on aspects of teaching online including creating online content, using virtual scenarios to create effective learning, and online pedagogy.

Case Studies

Digital Education provide case studies and best practice in the use of technology for teaching and learning from around the university. Examples include using LinkedIn Learning, Moodle, PebblePad, Content Capture (Panopto), TurningPoint, Xerte, Webinars and supporting teaching with TEAMS.

The Education Commons hosts examples of case studies in different pedagogical contexts including clinical, lab, studio, fieldwork, and placement environments.

The ABC learning design unit host case studies of how participating in ABC has led to module conversion in different higher education institutions across Europe.

References/ acknowledgement

Emily Nordmann1, Chiara Horlin2, Jacqui Hutchison3, Jo-Anne Murray4, Louise Robson5, Michael K. Seery6, Jill R D MacKay7 10 simple rules for supporting a temporary online pivot in higher education. https://psyarxiv.com/qdh25