

Building Rapport in the Online Teaching Space: Tips for Staff Who Teach

Communication and building a professional rapport with the students you are teaching will be critical during this academic year. There are myriad opportunities and means to accomplish this in both the online and traditional face-to-face class environment. This short guide sets out some of the key strategies that can typically help to build rapport with students at the start of each new module.

1. [Be welcoming to your students](#)
2. [Be clear and transparent in your communication](#)
3. [Build "presence" online](#)
4. [Be supportive, assist with problems where possible, and refer to available supports](#)
5. [Provide timely, constructive and detailed feedback/ feedforward to your students](#)
6. [Generate peer interaction and encourage deep learning through inclusive and relevant learning activities and assessments](#)

1. Be welcoming to your students



- Make introductory contact with your new students via the best channel for you (email, introductory post or announcement on your Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)) to welcome them to the module and to encourage their participation in induction-style activities that have been developed for them (such as introducing themselves and saying a little bit about themselves to their classmates in a discussion forum, etc).

2. Be clear and transparent in your communication



- Be succinct. Students may scan and skim your online communications. Aim for clarity in making your point.
- Communicating in a professional, conversational tone online, rather than a very formal one, is more likely to build a stronger rapport with, and be preferable to, your students.
- On your module site, set out clear times of day, and days each week, when you will be available online; the most appropriate communication methods for students to use with you; and reasonable response times to student queries.

It is neither reasonable nor practical to have an expectation of yourself to respond to all queries immediately. Therefore, it's a good idea to designate dedicated hours when you will intentionally check in on student queries across your modules. If this is adequate, reasonable, and communicated in a clear and visible manner to your students on your module site, they will respect this.

For example, you could indicate that you will endeavour to respond to student module queries within a 24-hour period.

Of course, some deviation is to be expected in the event of circumstances or queries that may be more complex or time consuming to address. This too could be simply and succinctly communicated to students by stating that more complex queries will likely result in longer wait periods for a response.

- Give clear, visible and regular advice to your students about your expectations, and requirements, for their participation also.
- Communicate important dates and what they mean for the students for all activities, assessments, etc.

3. Build "presence" online



- Realising the goal of student engagement online will require your own active and regular engagement. As early as possible, encourage, scaffold and support your students' engagement and model the practices that you would like to see them exhibit. If succinct, analytical and curious posts in your discussion forums are what you would like to see, then demonstrate this to your students in a post of your own, so that they can see what that looks like and therefore model your approach.

Watch this recorded session (~12mins) developed as part of ULs Learning Technologists Forum CPD series for a more in-depth look at [Using the Forums Tool in Sulis](#) (Risquez, 2020).

- Build "teacher-presence" early and often and be responsive on discussion forums ([Garrison et al., 2000](#)). Let your students know that you're there.
"A strong teacher-presence provides online students with a sense of belonging, helping them to feel connected to a community of learning and increasing their likelihood of persisting." ([Stone, C., 2016](#), p.3)

Introduce each week's material to students with a module announcement (text, audio, video). Organise that this goes out to students at the same time each Sunday evening/Monday morning. This creates consistency in messaging, makes you more visible, and helps to build predictability into your online presence. The *Announcements* forum on Sulis caters to this.

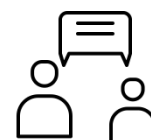
Each faculty has been working on a 'Module template' which serves the purpose of helping you to manage your module interface. Find out more within your faculty from [those working in learning technology](#).

4. Be supportive, assist with problems where possible, and refer to available supports



- Sometimes students need to feel connected with the teacher, their class, and their programme of study, be that through coursework activities or more socially oriented chats. Tuning into students' needs and scaffolding their learning journey somewhat can ease the sense of isolation that can sometimes be experienced when undertaking remote online study.
- Refer them to help or support they require as provided by the University. Support resources for students are likely located on their Programme Information site.
- On occasion, peer support and guidance may not be enough. Certain concepts may require your intervention for students to grasp them or else to steer conversation back in the right direction if it has veered off-course. On any discussion forums that you have established, and prompted primarily peer-to-peer communication on, it's important to reserve the right to intervene in a thread of discussion where you feel it is necessary to signpost the discussion back in a suitable direction. Depending on the subject matter being taught, and the degree to which the conversation has veered off-course, this can be a subjective decision, and one that is at your own discretion.

5. Provide timely, constructive and clear feedback/ feedforward to your students



- Undoubtedly, providing task-based feedback/feedforward to students in higher education, which they can action in subsequent activities and assessments, can have a significant positive impact to bear on each individual student's learning journey through their programme of study.

- Where possible, provide students with opportunities to action and showcase subsequent application of your task-based feedback/feedforward in future activities and assessments.

6. Generate peer interaction and encourage deep learning through inclusive and relevant learning activities and assessments



- For formal interactions consider the option of building peer-to-peer engagements into coursework activities - peer review, peer feedback, peer grading, etc.
- Prompt peer responses to queries that they can reliably respond to.
- Encourage informal peer support opportunities such as study groups on social media, a socially oriented discussion forum or *Student Café*-style discussion area on your module.
- "Creating a stimulating task is an essential part of successful online discussion. We look for tasks which can intrinsically motivate students' participation but also meaningfully link their discussion to learning outcomes." (Verenikina et al., p.5)

For a more detailed look at building E-tivities, or online activities, of this nature, watch this recorded session (~30mins) developed as part of the UL Learning Technologists Forum CPD series - [E-tivities As Alternative Assessments](#) (Slattery, 2020).

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