

Supporting Student Interaction and Engagement Online



Centre for
Innovation in
Learning and
Teaching

<https://bit.ly/CILTBuildingCommunityOnline>

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Online and blended learning has many affordances to enable students to engage with each other and the lecturer. To support and encourage student interaction and engagement in online spaces, teaching staff (lecturers, teaching assistants and tutors) will need to purposefully plan ways in which students can be included. This may entail setting up the atmosphere from the start of the course, restructuring activities so that student voices can be heard, conducting mini course evaluations to see what is working and involving other teaching staff so that there is more help available and to keep ideas fresh. In addition, there is a need to support individual students, particularly through setting up feedback mechanisms and providing regular opportunities to connect, which has been reported as a particular challenge in the [2020 student experience survey](#).

This is possible if carefully planned and realistically approached. We have included a few suggestions and resources which can be used.

Creating interaction and engagement in online classrooms

When planning student interactions and engagement for the online classrooms, start by thinking about what usually happens in your classroom and what needs to change, as well as being mindful of the principles of [low tech teaching](#) (connectivity is a crucial element in ensuring opportunities for engagement are inclusive for all students as much as possible). Below are a few suggestions when planning purposeful student interactions and engagements. We have categorised these suggestions as: *general advice*, *relevant at the beginning of your teaching* and *during your course* as well as ideas around *supporting individual students*.

General

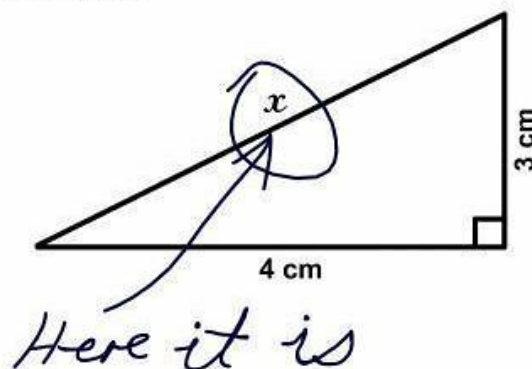
1. Educator online presence

It is important for teaching staff to be visible online to reduce students' feelings of isolation and build a learning community. A key challenge is to encourage students to engage actively and feel part of a dynamic online classroom. This can be created by communicating regularly and making use of various tools such as:

- Including a picture of yourself in your Vula course site (or avatar / graphic representation of yourself. Example: [Bitmoji](#)) with a short introduction about yourself to let your students know your philosophy of teaching, your professional interests, and your research. You can also create a brief video of yourself talking to your students to increase the feeling of presence and to help set up the atmosphere of learning and sharing.

- Using the [picture-in-picture recording video options](#) when creating narrated PowerPoint Slides so that students see a 'face' rather than just content. These kinds of videos are particularly important at the beginning of lessons if classes are taught asynchronously.
- Posting [Vula announcements](#) at the start and/or end of each lesson, week or new topic. Another suggestion is to include a motivating quote or a highlight of the week as a means to create excitement and to encourage interest in the course.
- Check in or simply say hello in the Vula chat room whenever you log on to Vula.
- Replying to forum posts and using [voice notes](#) rather than only text - voice is more personal. [Voice Notes](#) can be added in any Vula tool that uses the Rich Text Editor, which includes Lessons, Announcements, Forums, and even Assignments.
- Create a regular pattern of interactions by using specific engagement tools for specific purposes and being available on these tools at certain times. Communicate the pattern and your availability to students to reduce anxieties around academic support and feedback.
- Sharing your personal experience when introducing the topic or concept - this helps students to relate to you and real world contexts. Don't forget they may have experiences or stories to share too - so ask them to share as well.
- Make use of humour to help create the atmosphere of warmth and fun, so that students feel comfortable to approach you. Do be mindful that jokes may offend - if you are unsure, it is best to check with colleagues if it is appropriate or not. Humour can be in the form of sharing a funny (yet relatable) image, such as below, video or text.

3. Find x.



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2. **Make sure students know how to get help**

In the course overview, provide details of persons to contact for technical, admin and course related concerns, as well as student support services. If there are multiple lecturers, teaching assistants and tutors involved in the course, include their details and their availability (virtual office hours). Access to UCT email addresses would ensure that students are able to send lecturers or their tutors a direct message via email and [Microsoft Teams](#) chat if preferred. [Microsoft Teams](#) also presents users with the opportunity to use a mobile app. The [Vula Q&A tool](#), which has the option of posing questions anonymously as well as categorising questions, can also be used for students to ask questions and read answers to other students' questions.

3. **Facilitate two-way interaction**

Purposefully include interactive activities in synchronous and asynchronous sessions so that there are multiple opportunities for students to engage with the teaching staff and each other, as well as opportunities to share their thoughts so that they can feel heard and included in the course.

Suggested tools that can be used:

- [Forums tool in Vula](#) - this is a good asynchronous, low-bandwidth tool with a rich editor which can support the inclusion of rich text, images, video and voice notes. It structures communication into different topics containing threaded conversations with replies and works best for longer and deeper discussions.
- ['Comments' tool on Vula Lessons pages](#) - this tool works best for shorter asynchronous responses, and is helpful to embed on a Vula Lessons page for student feedback and comment in response to a prompt question or content you have posted.
- [Channel posts in MS Teams](#) - works best for group interaction and feedback regarding specific lessons or topics, hence it being a "channel". This feature can be used in both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Participants can post, reply and "like" each other's posts and it also affords them the opportunity to share files in various formats.
- [Padlet](#) (used in Vula, Microsoft Teams or externally) - is a visual 'board' feature on which multiple posts can be displayed in one space. These posts allow for various media to be uploaded and students can reply, rate and "like" other posts. This works well for sharing students' works with the class and others.



4. Establish ground rules for communications

Establish and communicate ground rules at the outset of the course. Promote these as 'rules of engagement' and 'rules of collaboration' which should be co-constructed and agreed upon by the teaching staff and students to ensure buy-in from all parties. These could be drawn up during an online meeting using collaborative tools (Google documents, [Jamboard](#), Microsoft file documents in [Microsoft Teams](#) or [Office365](#)) to capture students' inputs. Post these rules on Vula as a reminder. Some important considerations:

- **Practices** - Get agreement on practices so that there is greater inclusion. You may want to consider how and when questions and inputs should be taken (after, interject, in chat, hand raising); if the speaker's camera should be off or on during meetings.
- **Online Etiquette** - This is an important aspect which involves respect for others and their opinions, use of the right tone which includes how one types (capital letters and the language used) and to avoid posting or sharing inappropriate material.
- **Punctuality and participation** - Decide if students should arrive 5 minutes before class is due to start, if there is a late coming policy and if participation is part of DP.

Stages of building interaction and engagement

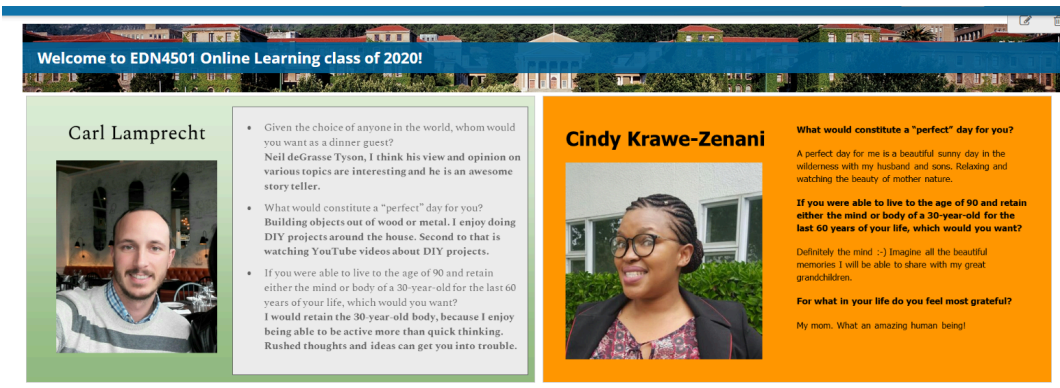
It is important that student interaction and engagement be included right from the start of the course. Below are a few suggestions on how to initiate and establish regular interactions and engagement from the beginning of the course/ semester and whilst it is running.

Start of the course

- **Introductions:** Introduce the teaching staff (lecturers, teaching assistants, tutors) using short recorded videos (not more than 2 mins) or using photos so that students can see their teachers faces and become familiar with their voices - particularly if voice notes or podcast lectures will be used in the course. You can also use photos of teaching staff on a lessons page.
- **Student introductions:** There are a variety of means for doing this within Vula ([lesson pages](#), [forums](#), [commons](#)) and through other platforms ([Padlet](#), [Google slides](#), [Microsoft Teams](#)). Encourage students to create profiles which can be shared/uploaded to the Vula course site as a "Class gallery" item so that students can learn about each other and gain a sense of belonging. Provide clear instructions about what to do, and how to do it. Lecturers posting first will help break the ice.



The image below is an example of a student gallery snippet from the EDN4501 Online course.



- **Set up the protocols for student queries:** Make it very explicit how students can get in contact with the teaching staff. It is important that there are prescribed channels for queries, and a mutual understanding of when students can expect responses (i.e that you will not be responding to queries outside of office hours unless in the case of an emergency; that students will get a response within XX hours and if not they should follow up). Choose channels that work well for you and the students and only use communication channels that you will check regularly. Teaching assistants and tutors can also provide valuable support for students, but make sure they have set realistic parameters (see [Guidelines for working with tutors](#)).

During the course

- **Set up a regular pattern of communications ('course heartbeat'):** This will provide much needed structure to students and be a means to provide both information and feedback to the whole group. [Vula Announcements](#) are the most commonly-used tool for this and can include voice notes and small pics, but be mindful of file size since it is going to their email, which may have an attachment size limit. Regular communication through the Vula Chat Room, Email, [Microsoft Teams](#) and WhatsApp can also be set up.
- **Create positive energy in sessions with [online icebreaker activity](#).** These can be used in the beginning of asynchronous and synchronous sessions in which 5 - 10 minutes are used for the class to engage in some form of team / class building exercises. These activities can be themed based or informal and fun. More ideas can be found here around [community building exercises in higher education](#) that you could explore further and tailor to use for your course.
- **Encourage peer learning** through the use of relevant and contextual topics. Students can engage with these topics through tools such as Forums, [Polls](#), [Checklists](#), [Comments](#), [Student Pages \(Vula tools\)](#) or external tools such as [Padlet](#), [Mentimeter](#), [Socrative](#), [Microsoft Teams](#). Please note external tools will incur some data costs - so monitor use and make this known to students.



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- **Assign pair work, group work and collaborative activities** for synchronous and asynchronous sessions; assignments and online class work. For collaborative project or written work, [google documents](#) , web [Office365](#) and [Microsoft Teams](#) documents can be set up which allows for multiple users to work online at the same time without the need for saving their work. For synchronous sessions, breakaway rooms can be used in [Zoom](#) or [Microsoft Teams](#).
- **Do early and regular evaluation:** In order to do a diagnostic of how students are feeling in the course, after the first term or mid-way through the semester, do a short evaluation to check-in on students. Based on these results you can determine whether you are providing adequate support.
- **Set expectations for conduct in peer-to-peer engagements:** Where peer-to-peer engagements are created, involve and check with those participating about the best methods and outline the 'rules of engagement' or 'rules of collaboration'. These rules of connecting are important to establish for both small classes, tutorial groups and large groups.
- **Set contact points for longer assignments:** If you will be using long-term group projects in your course, set project milestones or other short-term deadlines so that group members are required to maintain contact with one another. This will help keep groups active and members communicating with one another.
- **Explore what options there are** for [live synchronous engagements within the lowtech guidelines](#). Use synchronous spaces for engaging students and getting feedback about how they managed the workload for the week, highlights, challenges, what can be better in terms of the running of the course, etc. Synchronous can mean live chat sessions in texts through Vula chat, Whatsapp, or a Microsoft Teams chat/channel (these require less bandwidth and data in comparison to live video meetups). If live sessions are held, monitor attendance and if there are students absent, follow up or ask a tutor to follow up on why they could not make it.



Supporting individual students

While building a sense of community and engagement for the class as a whole is important, this community is also made up of individuals who may require support at a different level. Below are a few suggestions, to create spaces for students' voices to be heard, which you may want to try.

- **Check in on student activity**

Vula

If you are concerned about individual students not engaging or interacting within your Vula course, below are some suggestions as to how you can make use of various Vula tools to review student activity in order to offer relevant support:

- [Site Stats](#) can generate reports which provide an overview of a student's activity within the Vula site (Note, that these stats are not generated in real time).
- [Forum statistics and grading](#) can provide a snapshot of students' interactions with Forum conversations.
- [Gradebook](#) can be useful to see when there are 'missing' grades.

MS Teams

If you are the owner of an MS Teams channel there are some high-level statistics you can access regarding participation and activity of the group as a whole, but not at an individual level.

- **Provide opportunities for peer support**

Depending on your class size, you may not have the capacity to follow up and respond to each of your students as much as you would like to. An idea here may be to use peer support with defined roles or a buddy-system in which students can offer each other both academic, basic technical and moral support.

- **Make use of familiar and accessible communication channels**

[Vula Chatroom](#), [WhatsApp](#), [Zoom](#) and/or [Microsoft Teams](#) can all be used for individual or group chats. Interaction can be at a group level, one on one and in some instances can be anonymous, should the student have a personal matter they need to inform you about. If you have a big class, teaching assistants and tutors can assist in doing regular follow ups in small groups or individually. [Setting expectations up front](#) can help to maintain the focus of the conversation.

Student Initiated	Teaching Staff Initiated
*Vula Q&A *Vula Forums Email	*Vula Q&A *Vula Forums *Vula Question



Vula Messages Vula Chatroom Vula Commons	*Vula Polls Email Vula Messages Vula Chatroom Vula Commons Vula Announcements
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* Can support anonymity if set up in advance

● **Provide points of interaction**

Include opportunities for feedback to quickly and informally assess how students are doing. This could be a quick poll question that is posted mid-stage in the course while working asynchronously through a lesson in Vula or as part of the lesson, when connecting synchronously via Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

● **Elicit feedback and participation (individual / pairs / group)**

Consider adding activities which are designed to elicit participation and feedback from students, either as individuals, pairs or even small groups. This provides an opportunity for getting different students to work together and to fulfil different roles and responsibilities within the group. Some ideas around collaborative activities include:

- Get students to share links to their editable Google docs or Office365 documents. These platforms also allow students to collaborate in real time on the same document, which can be ideal for group tasks.
- Have students share drafts of papers, visuals, or oral presentations prior to the class and then break into groups for discussion/feedback. Students could also share with the class in real time, for example, through live screen sharing and give feedback to each other's work.
- Asynchronously, students could post drafts of their work in Vula. Peers can read/view and respond with the guidance of a rubric which prompts for specific feedback.

● **Gamification (certificates and acknowledgement of effort)**

Through creative collaborative play, gamification can transform the classroom environment and regular activities into a game. It can be a powerful tool in the classroom and has been found to promote learning and deepen students' understanding around the subject matter. There are several tools and methods one can use to create a gamified interaction in the classroom.



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- [Wooclap](#): is a collaborative tool which can be used synchronously or asynchronously to add interactivity to presentations, to elicit feedback and interaction through a variety of content types.
- [Kahoot/Quizizz](#): is a quizzing and survey tool, ideal for both synchronous and asynchronous interactions.
- [Flip grid](#): is a simple, free, and accessible video discussion experience for students to engage with.

Through recognition of work done and achievements of the class as a whole, group or individual, motivation can be maintained by presenting individual awards, certificates or even posting a “leader board” acknowledging contributions and accomplishments to date.

● **Timely responses**

Try to follow up as soon as possible, to messages received from groups and individuals, even if this is an acknowledgement indicating that you have noted and received their message and that you will follow up shortly. Communicating your virtual “office hours” to students will establish realistic expectations, especially after hours and over weekends, and will let them know when you will be available to offer support.

Additional CILT resources

- [Student Engagement](#) [CILT Teaching & Learning Resources web page]
- [Tools available for online student engagement](#) [Google doc]
- [Insights from the Student Experience Survey](#) [Google doc]
- [Engaging students through online activities](#) [Google doc 3 pages]
- [Communicating and Community building during online learning](#) [YouTube video 20 mins]
- [Building Community Online](#) [YouTube video 4 mins]
- Further suggestions from [CILT Teaching Online Portfolio](#) [Google doc -see section 6]
- [Guidelines for course conveners working with tutors](#) [Google doc]
- [Synchronous Teaching Guide](#) [Google doc]



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Some useful links

Articles

Bali, M. (2020, August 11) Building Trust & Creating Online Safe Spaces for Marginalized Participants [Blog post] Retrieved from <https://blog.mahabali.me/uncategorized/building-trust-creating-online-safe-spaces-for-marginalized-participants/>

Thomas, G., & Thorpe, S. (2019). [Enhancing the facilitation of online groups in higher education: a review of the literature on face-to-face and online group-facilitation](#). *Interactive Learning Environments*, 27(1), 62-71.

Website

Equity Unbound - OneHE
<https://onehe.org/equity-unbound/>

Course

[Facilitating Online](#) is a completely online course which provides a solid foundation for facilitating online events and courses. It is registered as a short course at UCT. Facilitating Online was developed by the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching and is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York as part of its support for the e/merge Africa network. Several free places are available for UCT staff. You can address queries to facilitationcourse@emergeafrica.net



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