



## Checks and Tips for Encouraging Interaction and Discussion

There are no hard and fast rules about how to set up a discussion space for your students. Every group, every need is different. And to some extent, each time you work with a group, the way you will interact with them and them with each other, will involve trial and error. You will quite possibly experience 'surprises' – interactions that are totally unexpected and you might need to be flexible and fluid with your approach.

That said, here are a few tips, based on commonly documented experiences that might help guide you:

### **ENSURE THE DISCUSSION ADDS VALUE**

Participation in the discussion should be related to the learning objectives – so that students feel what they are being asked to do is relevant and productive.

### **DECIDE IF AND HOW TO ASSESS**

Most students will participate in a discussion exercise if they are going to be rewarded for it. Usually allocating even a small amount of the final grade to participation or contribution in the discussion will lure students. (See the assessment section for example rubrics).

### **MAKE EXPECTATIONS AND CRITERIA CLEAR**

State what you expect in terms of quantity and quality of participation – from the outset, usually in the introductory materials of the course. Include a rubric that clearly outlines expectations in terms of allocated marks for assessment. It is useful to define a 'discussion space' – rules, tone etc - as a group.

### **GET OFF TO A GOOD START**

It's a good idea to start with an introduction 'space' before you get down to business. Firstly, this lets everyone get to know each other, it breaks the ice and it allows people time to become familiar with the technology being used. It's unfair to expect all students to jump into important theoretical discussion before they are comfortable with the environment. You can weave in questions that help a group become familiar with each other and with what they'd like to get out of interaction with you and each other. Encourage and reward participation by responding quickly to posts. Be positive!

### **BE PREPARED TO STAND BACK**

One of the most powerful aspects of online interaction is the teaching and learning that occurs between students. Be prepared to take a back seat, when it is appropriate and allow peer-peer learning to occur. But you do need to monitor what is going on and step in when and as you see necessary. Redirect, point to resources, ask questions that encourage students to take issues further. Facilitate, don't dominate! Be interested, not absent!

### **TAKE ADVANTAGE OF 1-MANY**

If you commonly receive questions on a topic, ask for permission to share the questions and responses with the group – it will save you time dealing with a multitude of 1-1 interactions. Build a course FAQ – and add to it each course.

### **USE PRIVATE EMAIL WHEN APPROPRIATE**





Mostly, groups tend to deal with their own interaction issues. But occasionally you will have to draw out a shy student or deal with a very dominant one.

## Asynchronous or Synchronous?

Asynchronous communication occurs when people interact at different times. A participant can share a message at one time and much later receive a response. Discussion of one issue can therefore take place over a long period of time. It is very useful when participants are not all able to be present at the same time.

Synchronous communication occurs when all participants are available at the same time. Although they may not be at the same place, discussion happens at the same time.

Each type of communication engenders a different type of engagement. The table below gives a brief overview of these differences (adapted from the [E-Primer Series](#), AKO Aotearoa):

Synchronous	Asynchronous
<b>Immediacy</b> – students are together at the same time, enabling conversational dialogue and exploration of ill-defined problems and immediate feedback	<b>Flexibility</b> – independence of time and place
<b>Spontaneity</b> – there is room for the unexpected and issues can be clarified as they come up	<b>Broad participation</b> – not restricted to linear discussion, nor requiring assertive interjection
<b>Presence</b> – participants can see and respond easily to one another's emotional states, making it easier to enthuse others (especially in face-to-face sessions); communication is likely to better reflect student feelings	<b>Time to reflect</b> – students can read and carefully consider the contributions of others
<b>Efficiency</b> – a matter can be settled in minutes, whereas with asynchronous communications it might take days	<b>Time to compose</b> – students can carefully prepare their contributions before communicating them
<b>Group</b> – shy or less assertive students may find it more difficult to participate and unless the groups size is small, discussion can be difficult to follow	<b>Review</b> – communications are stored, and can therefore be reviewed by students (also true of recorded or archived synchronous sessions)
	<b>Group</b> – with management work well with large groups and shy students may be more inclined to participate

