Setting Expectations In Blended Learning

Talking About... Learning & Teaching

University of Birmingham

Establishing expectations (a baseline for both of students and of tutor support) is as important aspect of creating a positive learning environment whether the mode is face-to-face, blended and online. Expectations give students an understanding of module requirements, help students feel comfortable, and establish a sense of trust between classmates. Expectations also make the module environment feel safer and learning is more likely to occur as a result.

Due to the novelty of blended and online modules or sessions, setting expectations is especially important as a foundation. The majority of students will have little knowledge or experience of how to participate effectively in these types of learning environments. This uncertainty may lead to a lack of meaningful participation and therefore limit learning. Clearly stated expectations help students learn how to work with other students and with the tutor, and provide a reference for working with students who are not abiding by the rules.

How can I Encourage Required Behaviour in Blended or Online Teaching & Learning?

Set and communicate your expectations for the blended or online session or module.
- Involve students in setting their own online group working (EBL/PBL etc) rules.
- Ensure that students agree to the group working rules so they can help hold each other accountable.
- Assign students individual roles within their EBL groups.
- Ensure that students are aware and understand the online attendance requirements for accessing "presentation content".
- Model expected behaviour.

Discuss the need to create and set classroom norms for an online environment. Some typical problems that occur in online communication include:

- Misunderstandings due to unclear content in messages.
- Misunderstandings and wasted time due to unclear or pointless subject headings
- Tensions resulting from word choices (online tone).
- Students feeling left out if no one responds to their postings.
- Students sending too many messages, especially messages that are not meaningful.
- Students not posting any messages or not responding to other students' messages.
- Students posting several topics under one subject line.

Some Typical Guidelines

- **Format** — Should be informal but thoughtful. Do not post a message until you have taken time to review its contents and header. Your message should have a meaningful and accurate subject line descriptor. This will eliminate the need for peers to sort through mail / discussion boards with topics that do not interest them
- **Sensitivity** — Keep sensitivity in mind. Remember that there are human beings with feelings who read the messages.
- **Humour** — Be very cautious about using sarcasm and humour. Without nonverbal cues and voice tone, "subtle" humour can easily be interpreted as searing sarcasm.
- **Confidentiality** — Inform students that confidentiality is important and work that is posted in an online environment should not be shared outside the classroom, except with permission of the writer.
- **Context and quotes** — Include the points that you are responding to in the text of your reply by quoting or summarizing a portion of the text from the original message. Establish and use professional guidelines when citing references.
- **Response time** — Check and respond to your discussion board postings regularly (e.g., every morning, every other day) and respond promptly. This expectation could be negotiated during the induction development activity.
- **Respect** — Be respectful of differences. Do not expect all peers to agree with everything you say and be considerate of differing opinions.

Give Me an Example

You can use the following activity to set expectations for an online class. Plan the activity for the first week. If the module takes place in a blended learning environment, parts of this activity can take place online and other parts can be used in the face-to-face sessions.

Divide the cohort into small groups and assign each group an area (discussion board on your WebCT section or a page on a Wiki).

- Ask groups to generate a list of rules they believe are suitable for class behaviour. The list should contain five to ten items but can be longer. Each group must come to an agreement on the list and post the list in a discussion forum for others to read. Topics might include participation levels, message content and format, active listening, interpersonal communication, references (citations), confidentiality, attitude and timeliness. Remember to reserve your right to renegotiate norms that conflict with your beliefs about effective teaching and learning in online environments.
- Create two lists – one with common rules and one with rule suggestions that did not appear in all groups.
- Ask students to review the lists, discuss any points that you do not agree with, and then come to agreement on the final list.
- Review the list and post it. If there are any points you do not support, then renegotiate that point.
- Ensure that rules are followed throughout the course by encouraging students to monitor their own behaviours and the behaviours of others in combination with individual roles. You can intervene as necessary.
- Check with students after a few weeks to see if any rules need to be altered or new ones need to be added.

More Ideas

In your module handbook, WebCT or Wiki reserve a section where you clearly detail the expectations for being a blended or online student.

- **Timetable** — Detailing the group, individual elements whether F2F or online
- **Attendance Statements** — Link to the University's Due Diligence statement and inform the cohort how this covers the online elements of attendance. Clearly spell out what is expected as a minimum for logging on and engaging.
- **Reasonable Diligence** — Ensure that students are aware that "on this module is understood as being demonstrated as: …". Include a section that makes students aware that "attendance if we wish, can be documented by any or all of the following methods: a) Student tracking records in WebCT/Wiki, b) Submission/completion of assignments; c) Communication with your Tutor".

Where Can I Go for More Information?

- ***Discussion as a way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers*** Brookfield, S.D. & Preskill, S. (1999). Buckingham : Open University Press.

- **Research to Practice Online: Conditions that Foster Democracy, Community and Critical Thinking in Computer-Mediated Discussions** Gauske, J. & Wade, S. (2003-2004). *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 36(2), 137-153.

- **Distance Learning List Guidelines** Selfhelp Magazine at www.selfhelpmagazine.com/ppc/distance/distancelearning5.html.

- **Building Swift Trust in Virtual Teams** Tovey, J., Southard, S. & Bates, C. (2005, February). *Technical Communication*, 52(1), 1-6.

- **Your College E-Learning Team**