

Best Practices in Communication

These ideas are presented in a period of change as the universities communication policy is being reviewed as part of the transition project. The current policy does not adequately address the myriad of communication platforms we now have available, nor does it adequately consider the workload implications of poorly designed communication strategies in a world where students have electronic access 24/7. This document also seeks to help staff balance the needs associated with providing quality teaching and communication with the equally important need to train students to be independent lifelong learners. Throughout this document the word forum is used to not only denote the traditional CSU forum but any asynchronous communication tool (e.g.blog). Similarly, the term Chat, can be taken to mean either the Interact Chat tool or any synchronous communication platform.

Overall

There are three key practices that may assist you in improving the effectiveness of your communication with your students.

1. Design your communication strategy around the learning objectives, available staff (eg. tutors, Student support services, lecturers on other campuses etc) and course level scaffolding of skills (eg. If your subject has been identified as a playing a significant role in team building then more collaborative tools may be required).
2. Clearly communicate your strategy and expectations to the students. For example if the students will use group sites and chat for all communication, are non CSU sites acceptable or must they use Interact. Similarly do you wish to let your students know that all email/forum postings etc will be responded to on certain days of the week or you will not be answering emails on the weekend etc. If the communication boundaries are clearly defined then students are less likely to be disappointed by false expectations.
3. Ensure that all instances of feedback are clearly noted as being feedback. Sounds silly but published research has noted that the reason people often score poorly in the feedback part of evaluations is that students do not always recognise your formal/informal comments as “feedback”.

Best practice

To assist you in meeting minimum best practice in communication the following guidelines have been developed;

- Every subject should have a communication strategy that notes which platforms will be used for what reasons and when. Students should also be made aware of the frequency with which each platform will be monitored and queries responded to. This information should appear in the subject outline and on the Interact site.
- Announcements with the ‘email to all’ function should be used for all assessment and time sensitive information to ensure that all students receive pertinent news.

- All sites should include an asynchronous platform (eg. Forum) that is reviewed and responded to at least weekly (as per current CSU policy).

Design

Do you want a blanket strategy or will the communication needs shift during the session?

- Eg. If you have a group project that requires significant staff facilitation then you may indicate that during weeks X to Y all emails and chats will be answered within 24 hours. During other weeks the University standard of a 3 day turn around will apply (unless the questions have already been addressed in an appropriate area (eg. Blog, forum...)).
- Eg. If students are expected to comment on items posted by other students during certain weeks then you may need to note that they will need to access the relevant space several times a week during weeks X-Y. Ideally, timed announcement should also be created such that the students are reminded of this requirement during the relevant weeks.
- What types of communication do you need? Asynchronous (eg. Forums, blogs, wiki, pebble pad, email) and/or Synchronous Chat, online meeting tool, Skype, phone, 2nd life....?

Things to consider

- Too many modes can promote confusion with respect to what information can be found where.
- Students' knowledge and experience with the tools is important. Do you need to provide some training (eg. Quick captivate tutorial) on how to use the tool? What support is available to them? Would it be good to get library staff or student service to provide training in some areas to your class (or you)?
- Ways the tools are being used in other subjects in their courses. This not only affects their knowledge of the tools but the decisions as to how the communication strategy fits with the course objectives.
- Class size matters! Wikis, chat, and blogs may be ideal for your content and ideas about how to teach the subject but these can be very hard to use effectively in large classes without assistance eg. team teaching or online tutors.
- The style of communication the students will be using as graduates may also be important.
- Is the tool easily accessible to all students? While CSU policy requires all students to have access to a good internet connection, not all students have continuous reliable access and thus advanced tools requiring high speed internet and lots of downloads need to be carefully considered.
- How many staff members will be communicating with the students? How do you plan to manage multiple contributors? Will it be topic specific or time related eg weeks x-b = Beryl and c-r Doug?

- Phone based communication should be carefully considered for equity reasons (as it is unlikely that you would be able to offer the same level of service to all students), however, for our distance students a 2 min phone call may help re-engage them and thus enable them to continue their studies.
- Have you thought about using a synchronous tool (eg. chat or online meeting tool)? These should be considered for distance cohorts even if it is not used as part of the teaching strategy. This promotes social cohesion amongst the cohort and enhances engagement as a student.
- How frequently do you need to check the asynchronous platform (eg. Forum)? If peer learning is a part of your strategy then answering all questions before the student body has had the opportunity to respond will sabotage your peer learning goals. Your communication strategy may request that all urgent matters be sent via email so that other matters can be left open for others to engage with.
- Are you available on weekends or after hours? This will depend on your strategy, some staff happily run chat rooms or online meeting tools sessions (i.e. synchronous sessions) on evening or weekends for their distance students. Use of these options should be considered in line with your teaching strategy and your work/life balance. A word of advice; if you choose to run sessions out of hours then ensure that you have a practice run with the tool at a time when IT support is available so that you can determine possible problems and ways around them!
- How often do you expect the students to check a site/tool? If your Interact site holds resources and you use the email option when you send announcements then you may not need to note minimum expectations in relation to how often the students visit the site. If, however, you post weekly discussion points and expect students to respond X/y times then students will need to be told that they must check/engage with the site at least X times. Once again, a timed announcement can be created to remind students of this requirement at key times during the session.
- Have you given the students guidelines in relation to communication manners and practices? Will you only answer emails that are appropriately addressed? Is the use of capital letters considered shouting? Are students encouraged to use professional language and write in full sentences, or is free flowing communication with SMS phrases such as LOL and OMG acceptable?

Finally, Stick to your strategy! By the start of session you will have no doubt developed a strategy that fits with the subject objectives, your own workload and CSUs minimum expectations. Deviating from this midway through session may create undue stress for both you and the students. This is not to say you cannot be responsive to the cohort needs, just ensure that it is a cohort need and not that of a vocal minority or individual and that these changes will not affect your learning goals. Ensure any change and the reason for the change is clearly noted back to the students (eg. email to all?), acknowledging that they may have also organised their time management around your initial strategy. Navigating the myriad of communication options can be challenging for both lecturers and students; a template has been provided below to assist you with this task.

Communication Design Template:

	Announcements	Forum	Chat	Resources	Blog	Modules	Email	Phone	Group Interact Site	Pebble Pad	Online meeting tool
Content				X	X	X					
Assessment Info	X										
Lecturer-Class	X	X- All posting responder to within 5 days									
Student – Student (social)			X						WEEKS 1-4		
Student-Student (group work)			On group site weeks 4-8								
Content discussion		X									
Student-Class		X									
Lecturer-Student		X – Content related All posting responder to within 5 days					For personal issues e.g. extensions All emails answered within 3 days	By email appointment for personal issues			