More and more courses at the University of Ottawa now include an online component. The importance of this component will vary depending on the professor’s preferred teaching method, and so your online contribution as a teaching assistant will vary as a result.

As a result, it is essential to be in regular contact with the professor to clarify your role with respect to the desired level of interactivity with students.

The following suggestions and tips are intended to help you get students to participate and be fully engaged online.

We also strongly recommend that you attend classes, whether held online or in the classroom, in order to integrate in-class material and the discussions taking place with your student engagement strategies online.

Encourage student involvement

New communication technologies have enormous potential for increasing student participation and engagement. For example, students are already avid users of social networks because they enable discussion, sharing and communication.

Be present

It is important to make your online presence felt by students in order to lessen the feeling that they are all alone in the online environment. You can make your presence felt by asking direct questions of students who are also online, starting discussions, and requesting topics for forums, etc.

It is also recommended that you maintain regular online habits in order to promote regular online attendance by students use and to build a consistent consultation schedule. This way, students expecting
an online question summarizing the material covered during the last week will be there to try and answer it.

However, for maximum interaction, students need to play an active role in determining what they discuss. For the TA, it helps to hand over some control to the students so that they can determine, in part, how virtual meetings are to take place.

On a platform such as Virtual Campus, it is easy to give students the opportunity to determine forum topics, to tap into their ideas and opinions by asking them questions that encourage them to share and participate. To get students comfortable in this environment, you should also ensure that they have access to the help files for logging in and navigating their way around this platform. A link to help files can be provided directly in the syllabus or emailed to students directly.

In conversations involving several people, it is even possible to have a student moderate or facilitate an online discussion. Make sure that you provide them with specific instructions regarding this role.

Lastly, you can continue online discussions during face-to-face meetings if these are available to you. This will allow students who rarely participate in online discussions to see their relevance and possibly have more involvement in them.

**Online availability**

You may be required to be available to students online. There are both advantages and disadvantages to these online office hours that are worth considering.

**Virtual Campus**

With all of the different platforms available, we recommend limiting yourself to one virtual meeting space, preferably your course’s Virtual Campus. Knowing that you will be in a specific place online will make it easier for students to reach you. While Facebook, MSN and others are very popular, none have the technical support offered by team responsible for Virtual Campus.

Having an online presence encourages student participation. There are some who find this environment less intimidating than face-to-face meetings and take advantage of it to ask questions that they might not have asked otherwise for fear of being judged.

**More flexibility**

Your online office hours provide increased flexibility, allowing you to reach students at the time that works best for them. If necessary, this can sometimes be in the evening or on weekends. You can vary this schedule as long as you announce the changes to everyone at least a week in advance.
If appropriate, you can tie in your online hours with in-person office hours, ideally to be offered before or after class.

**Get comfortable**

When you are online with students, we recommend that you sit at a workstation where there are minimal distractions. An online assistantship requires as much care and commitment on your part as regular office hours, especially if you cannot see the person you are speaking to. Since much of communication depends on a person’s physical expression, an online TA requires additional effort to concentrate, be clear and concise. Avoid public or noisy rooms during your online office hours.

**Prepare for your online availability**

Once students are online, it is your job to ensure that they benefit from their consultation time with you. For this to happen, you must plan ahead for the meeting. This could mean completing the homework yourself before going online and explaining it to students, or reviewing the evaluation rubric before meeting with someone to discuss their grades. You may also need to contact your professor to make sure you understand the approach they want you to take during your consultations. Think of strategies to help students who have no idea where to begin solving the problems they face.

Make sure you guide them through the steps they will need to master the process. Providing them with the right answers alone will not help them in the long run.

You may have students who come to see you with a difficulty but who are unable to identify where they went wrong. As you review the material or homework in preparation for your online office hours, select the important questions or problems that you come across; having a database of these questions can be useful to students in a diagnostic tool such as an FAQ, for example. Their answers will help you understand where they are having problems, allowing you to focus your efforts on the areas that will be of most use to them.

**Using and moderating discussion forums**

Ideally, you should use the Virtual Campus and the discussion forums found there to ask questions and stimulate debate on issues related to the course (hence the importance of attending yourself).

To promote student reflection and participation, ask a question directly related to the course content for the week or summarize a large part of the material previously discussed; this will give students the opportunity to ask questions or discuss a specific topic that is of interest to them.

Similarly, preparing online discussion topics in advance is also a good way to encourage participation and the use of Virtual Campus. Use your online presence to ask for informal feedback on how the course is going and on how you might better support students. Demonstrating your concern with these issues will be appreciated by students and may even prove useful to you or the professor. For the best results, we suggest you do this early on in the session (by the third or fourth week).
Netiquette and emails

Make sure that all of the relevant contact information for getting in touch with you is made public (email address, online consultation hours and in the office, etc.).

Your response time to emails is important. In the first two weeks of the course, try to reply within a period of six hours. After this initial phase, you may want to advise students that you will reply within 24 or 48 hours of receiving an email. You may want to add a statement such as the following to the syllabus, in an appropriate location on Virtual Campus or even append it to your email signature.

“Any questions sent by email should receive a reply within two working days or the next class if it will be held within 48 hours of receiving the email. Please note that we reserve the right to not answer an email if the level of language is disrespectful.”

Be clear and concise
Avoid dealing with several topics in one email, even if they all involve the same recipient. Too much information creates confusion; asking a large number of questions usually results in partial responses since the reader can easily forget a question. In cases where it is necessary to include several questions on the same subject, it is important to do so in a structured and clearly numbered manner that the recipient will be able to refer to in their reply.

Avoid emotionally charged emails
Sometimes emails are more difficult to write due to emotional undertones. This can include responding to an aggressive message, persuading or motivating a student who has not been participating, or delivering bad news. Although reflection and preparation help us keep a cool head and focus on the logic of the issue at hand, sometimes emotions do find their way in and change the way we express our thoughts.

To avoid heated or unpleasant exchanges, pay particular attention to the tone you use. Aim to be as positive as possible.

Here are a few rules to follow for both emails and discussion forums:

- Abbreviations and chat slang (e.g. ROFL, LOL, brb) do not belong in professional communication.

- While email has simplified written communication, it has not changed our need for correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.

- Pay attention as well to the use of emoticons (smileys): while cute in an informal setting, their use is not professional. If these symbols
seem necessary to clarify your thinking or avoid misunderstandings, it is likely that you did not express yourself clearly enough.

• To emphasize a part of your message, it is preferable to frame it with * asterisks *. Using capital letters is equivalent to shouting. Ask yourself: Is this really how I would speak if the person was in front of me?

• Highlighting sections in red to emphasize urgency is unnecessarily aggressive.

• Simple colours should be used for everything from the text to the wallpaper, with choices such as black, grey, dark blue on white. Animated wallpapers are also to be avoided.

• Some text-only applications do not recognize bold, italic and underlining, and they should be kept to a minimum. The use of underlining and italics should not be abused: one underlined or italicized word is legible, but an entire paragraph can make the text more difficult to read.

• Do not send chain letters, advertisements or messages from dubious sources that may contain viruses.

• Do not forward a personal message unless without asking permission from the other person first.

• Do not respond to messages that are not directly addressed to you (“To:” primary recipient).

• In a message sent to a group of people, the tone should reflect the level of formality required by the recipient with whom you have the most formal relationship.

• If you cannot answer an email within 48 hours, it is strongly recommended to send an acknowledgment indicating to the sender that you have received their message and that you will respond as soon as possible. This simple practice will reassure the sender and help avoid subsequent and often impatient messages!

• Beware of address recognition that allows you to type only two or three letters of the recipient’s name: there may be more than one Nathalie in your contact list.

• Before hitting “Reply All,” make sure that all recipients are directly affected by the information that you are about to send.

• To reduce the effects of “Reply All,” always “bcc” recipient addresses when your message is sent to a large group. You will be the only person to receive replies and will respect your recipients’ anonymity.

• Use the high priority option sparingly; some people consider all their messages urgent, which ultimately reduces their credibility. Keep in mind that what is urgent for you is not necessarily so for your recipient.
Discussion forums

The first step in any online discussion platform should be to establish guidelines for what will and will not be acceptable. For example, abusive language and explicit content are obvious exclusions. Other behaviours, such as open criticism of a person or course, are more complex to manage.

For example, while allowing people to complain constantly may at first seem tedious, it may also allow real problems to surface. In short, these issues must be addressed in an early stage of planning and discussion rules should apply to everyone.

It is important to remain attentive to the content of chat rooms and online discussions. Specifically, you should watch for:

1. Failure to follow netiquette:
The physical distance inherent to online discussions between users may lead to inappropriate types of communication. This kind of problem could damage the image of your forum if you are not able to moderate them.

2. Going off-topic:
This is less serious than a breach of netiquette, but can sometimes be irritating and confusing. Moving away from discussion topics involves introducing a new topic to a discussion that is already in full swing in order to take advantage of the topic’s momentum. This is a mistake that must be corrected quickly by notifying the person and suggesting, if necessary, they start a new topic.

Best practices for moderating discussion forums

Participants in moderated forums may become disgruntled and may decide to stop taking part in the online discussion or even try to adversely affect it. Here are some best practices to follow:

1. Prevention is better than censorship: When you see negative or offensive behaviour, giving a polite warning is often enough for it to stop. If you opt for stricter moderating, it helps to have the support of others who were witnesses to your initial, polite warnings.

2. Thank participants for relevant contributions: Do not hesitate to highlight participants who have a positive impact and add value to the online discussion. They will want to continue taking part in the forum and may even be interested moderating a discussion themselves.

3. Justify your decision to moderate: If you are ultimately left with no choice but to remove a message, it is strongly recommended that an explanation be provided either directly by email to the author, or by posting a message in the forum if you consider it relevant for other participants to know the reasons for your decision.
Further Reading


