Engaging Distance Learners

The following guide provides some strategies current CUOL instructors use to bridge the gap between their face-to-face (in-class) and distance students.

Near- and far-distance learners

It is important to understand what is meant by distance learning and the types of learners it represents within the CUOL context. Distance education is a learning model in which students and instructors are separated by location and/or time, and in which students may complete courses or programs without attending scheduled classes in a specific location. Your distance learners can be further categorized into near- and far-distance learners. Many of your CUOL students (section V (fall term), T (winter term)) use the CUOL's online Video on Demand (VOD) service or the Rogers digital cable television broadcast to benefit from the flexibility that online learning provides, but are not physically located at a great distance from campus. These students are generally on campus regularly to take face-to-face courses, meet with fellow students and instructors, and may often attend your class in-person. At the beginning of the course, let all students know they are welcome to attend the face-to-face class if they are able to do so and do not make assumptions as to whether students are face-to-face, near-, or far-distance learners according to which section they are registered for as the section number often does not reflect the actual type of learner.

The use of engagement strategies is particularly important for those students who are learning at further distances such as in another city, province, or country and who do not have the option of coming to campus. When you are teaching, always be conscious about reaching out to these students and making them feel part of your learning community.

Community

Essentially, you are already helping to establish a classroom community by implementing any of the engagement strategies suggested in this guide. Community, in the online sense, can be defined as an environment which is enabled through the interaction and collaboration of its members using various technology and mixed media methods. Here are some ideas of teaching techniques to help establish community:

- **Use inclusive language when lecturing.** Instructors note the importance of building community through inclusive language such as “us” and “we” as it generates a sense of unity for both face-to-face and distance students.

- **Collaborate and share resources with fellow faculty.** Some departments maintain a WebCT repository to share resources, classroom management strategies, policies, and procedures. This is a great way to ensure consistency throughout the program as students will be able to apply course expectations throughout their program stream helping to lead them to academic success.

- **Build rapport with your students.** Consider posting a welcome video, podcast, or presentation to introduce yourself and your course. This is a way for students to see and hear you so you are not perceived as a “virtual” instructor. Here are some creative examples of instructor (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GiEUEJS3j8&feature=related) and course (http://edc.carleton.ca/chem_3201/) introductions.
• **Create a student introductions discussion thread in WebCT.** Welcome your students to share such information as their interests, reasons for taking the course, or where they live. For a more casual get-to-know-you activity, create various topic threads or survey questions such as favourite food, travel destinations, future plans and so on. You can then post this data later in the course or display it using a Wordle. It is also important for the instructor to acknowledge each student’s introduction individually. You can choose to respond publically or privately as a way to establish a connection.

• **Have a positive attitude.** Be enthusiastic and “market” your course to your students as a way to promote community. One CUOL instructor suggests, “You can get your students on board with your course when you are clear in your course and assignment objectives.” Always provide students with the learning objectives of your course and be mindful of how they can be applied in their future careers.

• **Use your voice and be honest.** Write all content and instructions using your own voice which comes across as more open and genuine with your students.

• **Evergreen your CUOL content.** A suggestion for CUOL Spring/Summer rebroadcast courses, to make students feel more engaged and not like they are just watching a “rerun” of your course, consider posting to WebCT brief, webcam video introductions for each session summarizing the content, updating original references or examples if based on timely material, and providing some questions or highlighting areas for students to consider during the viewing. If you don’t have a webcam, CUOL can facilitate recordings for you in one of their studios.

• **Set online office hours.** Schedule regular, online office hours or group discussions where you and the students can connect on a weekly basis. Setting course milestones such as an online discussion on a particular topic or assignments also forces students to keep up with the course material and provides a synchronous learning aspect to your course rather than feeling they are learning at their own pace.

• **Do not ignore the camera.** Try to make eye contact with and speak directly to the camera and your distance students. One CUOL instructor’s suggested strategy to acknowledge the presence of cameras in the classroom is by using some levity such as referring to the lecture as a “production” and the camera crew as the “producers”. For instructors who are not comfortable with technology, it also helps to break the ice by conveying this fact up front to your students in a light-hearted way (as one instructor calls “self-deprecating tech humour”) to avoid any potential embarrassment with technology mishaps later in the course.

• **Acknowledge your distance students and draw them into your lecture.** This can be achieved by referring to examples or experiences your students may have posted to the WebCT discussion board, or in an email, and sharing them with the class. For example, “John who is based in Winnipeg made a good point on this week’s discussion thread and suggested that …. You can draw on your students shared experiences and use introductory and rapport-building strategies that immediately establish an emotional connection. For example, on the first day of the course, set up a photo-sharing link or folder on WebCT and ask students to take and post photos of the view of the weather outside their windows at their particular locations. The weather is always a topic with which individuals seem to have a lot in common.

• **“Blur the professional and personal boundaries.”** You want your students to see you as a human being first and their teacher second. Based on your comfort level, consider sharing some of your personal life details or hobbies with your students so they get a sense of who you are as a person when you are not teaching. One instructor mentioned that this was a good method to indicate to your students know where you stand on work-life balance and that you are not always able to be online. One instructor’s strategy was allowing his students a glimpse into his personal life with the “take and post one photo a day of your life” challenge over the
Your students can glean a lot of information about you using this strategy and it's an easy and fun technique to incorporate into your course.

- **Use the WebCT discussion board or lounge area.** Do not underestimate the power of discussion boards to create a sense of community. This tried and true tool allows students to communicate with one another, to provide feedback, demonstrate critical thinking, help one another, and to make them feel connected to the class.

- **Incorporate media.** One key way to engage distance learners is to create an engaging classroom by using mixed media. An engaging lecture creates an engaging community.

- **Establish an online presence.** One instructor noted that by establishing a strong sense of being there and being present by creating a personal website, blog, or by tweeting can naturally improve classroom management in an online classroom. To this effect, the instructor and student relationship forms more organically.

**Communication**

Students have different learning styles and the interpretation of your content and instructions will vary according to student. One of the key ways you can communicate effectively with your students is ensuring all students receive the same instructions by providing explicit, detailed, and organized information. A lack of information increases the risk of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Inevitably you will need to respond to countless student inquiries. Consider compiling students' questions into a frequently asked questions document or study guide and post this to the WebCT website. Not only will this reduce the number of emails you receive from students asking the same questions, it will ensure all students have the information required to be successful in your course.

Here are some other suggestion communication strategies:

- **Post a detailed course syllabus.** A detailed course syllabus acts as the roadmap for your course. To encourage students to familiarize themselves with the various elements and resources of your course, use a scavenger hunt type of activity. At the beginning of your course, the scavenger hunt asks questions that require students to read the syllabus or navigate around the WebCT website such as “What percentage is taken off for late work?” and “Where do I access course journal readings?”.

- **Use rubrics.** Thoroughly state your criteria and grading rationale for assignments and examinations to eliminate confusion. This can be accomplished using a clear and concise rubric for every assignment. Also consider using a rubric for discussions, which is a self-reporting tool for your students in which they reflect on their participation in the class discussion for the week.

- **Provide regular feedback.** As some students can feel anonymous and isolated in an online course, it is important to ensure that they have a sense of your online presence by always responding to emails and providing discussion remarks in a timely manner. For student email inquiries, the general response time in an online course is within 24 hours. By providing feedback, not only are you providing your students with positive reinforcement for their efforts, but you are also providing them with a clear indication of what you are looking for in terms of their work and whether they are on track.

**Note:** Keep in mind that clear and concise communication will also be a great benefit to your ESL learners.

**WebCT**

CUOL instructors have suggested that how you manage your WebCT site can help promote the feeling of community. As CUOL courses consist of two WebCT sites (one one for the in-class section...
and another for the off-campus section) consider merging your WebCT sites into one which all your students can access as opposed to having to maintain two separate sites. Ask CCS to merge the two WebCT sites before you start adding content to either of the sites. In addition to being more effective and efficient by not having to maintain two sets of content, having a single course site is one of the key, visible elements that can help instill a sense of community and unity in the course. One WebCT site allows the face-to-face and distance students to interact with one another via messaging, discussion groups, and group projects. Separating the WebCT content acts as a physical and mental barrier and as one of the first glimpses into your course, suggests to students that they are being treated differently and are not part of the overall class depending on which section they are in.

**Activities and assignments**

To promote unity, ideally your activities and assignments should be the same for your face-to-face and distance learners. You can maintain one course syllabus for both sections but include additional information that is specific to distance learners such as instructions for completing assignments, group work, online office hours, etc.

Consider conducting supplementary face-to-face and/or online study sessions before your exams. You can schedule in-class and online study sessions and invite both face-to-face and distance learners to contribute to either of these sessions. A collaborative strategy that works well in these sessions is where one student asks a question, the second responds, and then the third provides a summary.

**Group work**

Do not shy away from incorporating group work into your CUOL course as it is possible to create engaging activities that will appeal to both your face-to-face and distance students. Online group assignments work well and provided that you have one WebCT website for all students, face-to-face students can pair themselves with distance students. For example, groups can be formed through communication on the discussion board where a student may post a message about looking for others to work with. You may also want to state as one of the assignment criteria that you encourage cross-section pairing to get students talking who may not normally get to work with one another. Collaborative activities focusing on sharing gather all your students into the same learning level.

**Final thoughts**

By incorporating some of the tips suggested in this guide and by focusing on streamlining your content for your distance and face-to-face students, it can help to minimize the effort required to teach a CUOL course. Given a few administrative tasks, the majority of the effort in transitioning to CUOL is adjusting your teaching attitude and philosophy. If you are enthusiastic and energetic about teaching, it will help to motivate your students and make them feel connected and part of a great learning experience even though they are not physically present in your classroom. A successful course starts by recognizing that you are leading and building a community of learners while also being a fellow learner yourself.