Online study at UNSW is often used as a component of campus-based learning and teaching. In that case the online activities and resources are there to support and complement other course components, such as lectures and practicals. Some courses are entirely online, with no campus-based components and with the online learning activities and resources as the main focus of study. Regardless of your mode of study, or whether you are on or off campus, it is important to make the most of the online components. You could be required to take part in online tutorial discussions or collaborate with fellow students in an online small-group projects.

Guidance for studying online

- Online participation guidelines
- Online discussions

Online Participation Guidelines

For many of you this will be your first experience of participating in tutorials and discussion groups through the Internet. To help you successfully use this new approach here are some general guidelines, also known as “netiquette”, for participating in an online discussion group. In addition your tutor will inform you about any other rules specifically relating to the conduct of your sessions.

GENERAL POLITENESS

The computer-based discussion is similar to a normal face-to-face discussion session in that it is a personal exchange of information. Therefore, it is important to observe the everyday courtesies you would employ in normal conversation. You should:

- be polite and avoid the use of bad language;
- respect other’s point of view;
- be aware of cultural differences;
- be careful with humour and sarcasm.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

In an online rather than a face-to-face discussion, you will notice some differences in the interactions with your fellow students, and in the way you contribute to the discussion. The discussion is usually conducted over an extended time frame which may be one or two days, a week or a semester. This allows you to either respond immediately to discussion points or to take some extra time to give a more considered response.

Using UNSW Blackboard

See the UNSW Blackboard Student Support website (http://support.telt.unsw.edu.au/blackboard/content/student/) and the Blackboard Student Orientation (access the Orientation course by logging into Blackboard and clicking on the Blackboard Student Orientation self-enrol link).

Ideas and impressions are transmitted by text so you will not have the advantage of body language to help you interpret meaning. Be careful to clearly convey your message and be aware that your classmates’ views may change over the period of the discussion. Try not to be judgmental, and give people the benefit of the doubt.

HINTS FOR NEW USERS

- Make a regular commitment to log-on and check the bulletin board so you can remain in touch with the group.
- Only use capitals for specific purposes, eg headings, otherwise it can seem like SHOUTING.
- Read all the contributions before you reply. It can be annoying if the same ideas are repeated once the discussion has moved on to other topics.
- Re-read your message before you send it. If you inadvertently send the wrong message, you will need to contact the system administrator to have it erased.
- As a general rule, try to keep your messages reasonably short.
- When contributing to the discussion try to move the conversation forward rather than making statements that could kill the conversation.
- The rules of copyright and plagiarism apply to electronic discussion groups just as they do elsewhere. If you use someone else’s ideas, cite them appropriately.
Online Discussions

Online study is different from learning by attending lectures and tutorials. There may be no lectures and tutorials, so rather than attending campus you will find the alternative to these in the course readings. They may be in print, such as in a textbook or collection of readings, or online in Blackboard or on the Web. By keeping up with the weekly reading you keep up with the course content.

An alternative to tutorials or seminars is online discussions. Use the online discussions to keep in contact with what the tutor and the other students are thinking and doing, and to contribute your own ideas to the discussion. The online discussions are an important element in how you will learn from the course. You need to log into and contribute to the discussion at least twice a week (preferably more often) to gain the maximum benefit from this form of study. Your contribution to the discussion does not need to be a long, carefully-written piece of work, but it should be a thoughtful and thought-provoking post on the topic that will keep the discussion lively and stimulating.

What Makes a Good Online Discussion?

Online discussions will help you to develop your understanding by thinking about the topic, by expressing your ideas about it, and by taking account of other students’ ideas. Sharing knowledge and ideas through discussion is a natural way for people to learn. An online discussion works the same way. The difference is that it is in writing, which gives people time to respond, and encourages them to think about what they have to say.

Online discussions are a valuable way to learn because they encourage thoughtful reflection. In this course, online discussions are an important element in how you will learn from the course.

Sending a message to an online discussion is called making a posting. Generally, there are four kinds of postings that you will make at different times. These are

1. introductory,
2. information sharing,
3. topic analysis, and
4. question or comment (questions and responses to other people's postings).

The desirable characteristics of the different postings are as follows:

**Introductory** - you may be asked to introduce yourself as you would in a tutorial. The online introduction is even more important because it is a particular kind of social situation. The written introduction gives you practice in using the online medium.

**Information sharing** - you will often be asked to share information online. This may be something the tutor has asked for, or may be something of your own to share on the topic, that has come from reading or other research you have done, or from your existing knowledge or experience. Information sharing helps you to get started, and it also helps the tutor and the other participants.

**Question or comment** - these postings form a discussion by posing questions or commenting constructively on other people's postings. These kinds of postings actually make it a discussion rather than a collection of monologues. It is as important for you to try to make interrogatory postings as it is to post a substantial topic analysis.

**Topic analysis** - this is probably the most important type of posting to the discussion, as it is often the part that is assessed. The best posting is substantial, demonstrates that you have done the reading, and reveals your command of the topic by the way in which you have related it to your own ideas, knowledge and experience.

- respond to other people in the discussion as well as the tutor
- aim for at least 200 words in length (however sometimes a short question or observation can help to develop the discussion in a new way).
- make a statement that develops the discussion with your own ideas. If other students have outlined the main issues on the topic, acknowledge this and try to develop these ideas further.
- Don’t be afraid to express your own ideas and opinions (as long as they are relevant to the discussion topic)
- Follow the discussion regularly to develop your awareness of the way the discussion is evolving.
- Post regularly to maintain your own involvement.

Acknowledgement

This document was developed by staff at the Learning & Teaching Unit UNSW, and includes material adapted from handouts developed by faculty teaching staff at UNSW.

**REFERENCES**


*Document version: BA300112*