



# E-Learning Guides

## 3. Activities for E-Learning

This guide will be of interest to academic staff who have responsibility for developing and facilitating e-learning and to those who are considering its implementation in their modules or programmes. It aims to help you to:

- understand how to encourage student engagement with appropriate e-learning activities and supporting materials
- reflect on the educational effectiveness of a range of activities
- plan for the integration and alignment of e-learning activities

## Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>DESIGNING ACTIVITIES .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ACTIVITY CHECKLIST .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>STRATEGIC APPROACHES .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>PLANNING GRID FOR AN ONLINE ACTIVITY.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>FURTHER READING .....</b>	<b>9</b>

## Introduction

E-learning opens up possibilities for the creation of innovative activities and collaborative group work which would not be possible in a conventional campus-based course, and an imaginative lecturer can ensure that the e-learning experience is a meaningful and valuable one for the students. Engaging students and sustaining their interest however can present a challenge. Designing **authentic, interactive activities** which will have real meaning for the students is vital, underpinned by the creation or transformation of suitable **support materials**. For the lecturer who lacks technical skills this may seem rather daunting, but new approaches do not necessarily mean that more conventional materials should be abandoned, nor that activities which work well in tutorials or seminars cannot be adapted for use online.

## The vision

Use technology to support your pedagogical aims by improving -

Communication between tutor & learner

Discussion among learners

Range and quality of resources

Range & quality of learning activities

Effectiveness of content presentation



As a lecturer you need not shoulder the entire responsibility for sourcing new materials. For example, if activities are carefully designed, the students themselves can be encouraged to contribute resources such as new web references and other sources they have found, so that by the end of a module a shared library of useful learning materials will have been gathered. Outcomes from activities such as reports or presentations and archives of interesting discussions can also be retained for future use, and as e-learning becomes more established, a range of innovative learning tasks and supporting materials will gradually evolve.

A varied selection of resources is also necessary to address the diverse needs of participants who may approach learning in different ways. For example, some students will be keen to engage with new topics by putting forward their views, sharing what they know, and

engaging in lively interaction with their peers. Others will be more reflective, preferring to consider the options carefully before committing themselves to an opinion. Some will be interested in all aspects of a new issue, whereas others will be more pragmatic and require only basic information to satisfy their learning needs. E-learning can often emphasise these **individual differences**, and an experienced lecturer will attempt to accommodate a wide range of approaches in the course design.

**Accessibility issues** should also be taken into consideration from the outset, and if necessary, adjustments made to allow for a diversity of needs. This can be as simple as preparing text alternatives for video and audio clips for those with visual or hearing impairments, or allowing extra time for students with dyslexia to contribute to online discussions. Further information on accessibility in e-learning is available from eLISU and the Making Connections Unit in GCU.

eLISU : accessibility for e-learning [elisu.gcal.ac.uk/access/index.htm](http://elisu.gcal.ac.uk/access/index.htm)

Making Connections Unit [www.mcu.org.uk](http://www.mcu.org.uk)

## Designing Activities



*"Get the activities right and all else will fall into place"*

(Rowntree, 1999)

Not all activities require extensive resources to support them. For example, you may decide to **post a question** on a controversial topic in the online conference and invite the students to comment, either individually or in groups. They could be invited to post relevant documents or web links which support their views, and to collaborate on the establishment of a useful **bank of materials** on that topic. Other activities such as **simulations** and **role plays** may benefit from more sophisticated materials and a wider range of technologies to support them.

It's important to **be realistic** about what is achievable. For example, if you are working with a team of academics, instructional designers and technical experts, you can afford to be more ambitious in your goals. If however you are working alone or in a small team with limited technical expertise, it may be more practical to limit your online activities to simpler tasks

which demand less time-consuming input. The **context** in which the course is taking place, the **learning outcomes** and the **student profile** will also influence what you decide to do.

## Activity Checklist

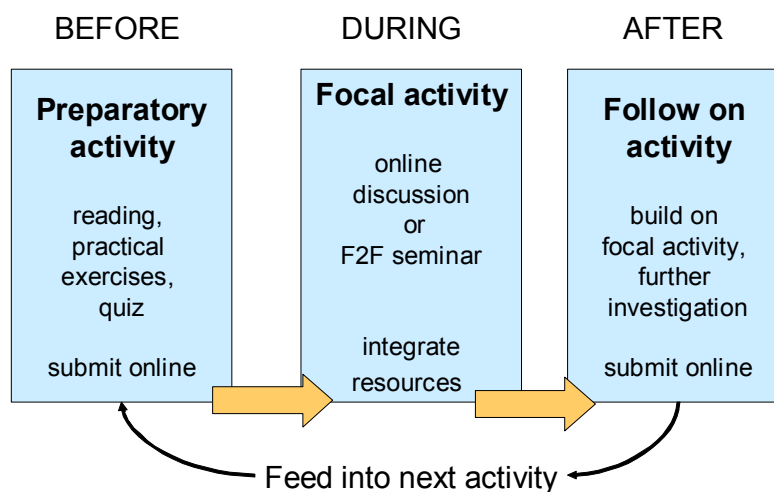
Activity	Purpose	Materials & Tools
<b>Web search</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To find new information</li> </ul>	Browser; web-based search engines
<b>Case study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To support problem-based learning</li> <li>To provide basis for discussion and debate</li> </ul>	Relevant documents; web resources; video & audio clips; sub-conferences for group discussion; graphics and diagrams
<b>Create a report</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to clarify knowledge and understanding</li> <li>to inform decision-making processes</li> </ul>	Relevant documents; web sites; newspaper articles; TV & radio reports; interviews with stakeholders (online or f2f); expert input to online discussion
<b>Role Play</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To enhance understanding of the views of various stakeholders who may be affected by a particular event or situation</li> </ul>	Documentation in a variety of formats to provide background information; sub-conference discussion areas; real-time chat; videoconferencing
<b>Create group presentations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To develop shared, re-usable resources</li> <li>To encourage collaboration and team-working</li> </ul>	Sub-conference for group discussion; shared whiteboard; real-time chat; videoconference; documents & web resources to inform the development work; PowerPoint; HTML editor; graphics; diagrams
<b>Quizzes and tests</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To test knowledge and understanding</li> <li>To provide feedback on progress</li> <li>To create basis for discussion</li> </ul>	Assessment tool such as BlackBoard or QuestionMark; expertise with Java or JavaScript
<b>Discussion and debate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To stimulate interaction</li> <li>To encourage critical thinking</li> </ul>	Sub-conferences for discussion; online keynote from expert; relevant documents; web links

<b>Simulations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To help understand concepts by experimentation with different parameters and scenarios</li> </ul>	Interactive models created with a simulation or animation tools such as Flash or Cosmos on CD-Rom or online; multimedia
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## Strategic Approaches

Rather than creating a series of separate tasks with specific outcomes, it can often be helpful to consider a more **strategic approach**, where each activity builds on the previous one to achieve the learning goals (Collis and Moonen, 2001). For example, a cycle of interactivity could comprise an individual **preparatory task** such as reading a document, searching the web for information or completing a short exercise, which will then lead the students into the **main focal activity**. This may be a collaborative online discussion, face-to-face seminar or videoconference during which the preparatory resources will be used to inform the debate. Following on from this, groups may be asked to investigate certain identified areas still further by **building on the focal activity** and augmenting the library of course resources by creating a final report or presentation.

### Strategy (Collis & Moonen, 2001)



Finally, when designing activities, it's important to consider how you will incorporate **discussion** and **group work**, and how you will provide **feedback** to the students on their achievements.

Salmon (2002) has coined the term **e-tivity** which she defines as 'a framework for active and interactive online learning'. She emphasises the fact that e-tivities do not necessarily require extensive resources to support them and advocates online discussion as the basis for developing understanding, deepening knowledge and strengthening the group identity. She suggests producing an initial **stimulus** or **challenge** to capture the interest of the students and engage them in some meaningful activity. E-tivities are described as:

- motivating, engaging and purposeful
- based on interaction between students, mainly through written message contributions
- designed and led by an e-moderator
- asynchronous (they take place over time)
- cheap and easy to run – usually through online bulletin boards, forums or conferences.

According to Salmon, their key features include:

- a small piece of information, stimulus or challenge (the 'spark')
- online activity, which includes individual students posting a contribution
- an interactive or participative element, such as responding to the postings of others
- summary, feedback or critique from the e-moderator (the 'plenary')
- all the instructions to take part are available in one online message (the 'invitation').

This approach may be seen to be more appropriate to some discipline areas than others, although the underpinning concept of encouraging students to establish their online identities through involvement in group discussions and a series of short activities is a useful method of ensuring their engagement with the learning and their continuing motivation. The grid provided at the end of this guide may help with the planning process.

Cost effectiveness is a major issue with regard to developing e-learning and the emphasis now is very much on the re-use of learning objects, both activities and resources. It makes

sense therefore to spend some time investigating existing possibilities before becoming heavily involved in developing new ones. For example, it is becoming increasingly common for the publishers of text books to provide accompanying CD-ROMs and web resources to accompany their publications, many of which will include useful activities which can be easily incorporated into modules.

**The Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)** is another excellent source of inspiration, and many of their 24 subject centres provide information on discipline specific resources and case studies. Their Generic Centre also disseminates information on various learning and teaching issues, including e-learning. All can be accessed from the LTSN home page. The JISC Resource guides are also useful sources of information. Within GCU, the Library Subject guides at have links to many useful resources, including e-journals and educational web sites.

LTSN	<a href="http://www.ltsn.ac.uk">www.ltsn.ac.uk</a>
Library Subject Guides	<a href="http://www.lib.gcal.ac.uk/subject/index.htm">www.lib.gcal.ac.uk/subject/index.htm</a>
JISC Resource Guides	<a href="http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=resguides">www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=resguides</a>

Time spent in designing meaningful, engaging activities is worthwhile and will pay off in the longer term as a re-usable library of e-learning options builds up in your Department.

## Planning Grid for an online activity

Aim of activity	
How many students? UG/PG?	
Will they work individually or in groups?	
Type of activity - what will the students do?	<p>Preparation: (e.g. reading, web searches etc.)</p> <p>Focal activity: (e.g. discussion, debate, report, presentation etc.)</p> <p>Follow-up: (e.g. further investigation, summarise etc.)</p>
What resources will they require?	
Which technologies will support this?	
How long should it take?	
How will you manage feedback to students?	
Will it be assessed? If so, how?	
How will the activity be evaluated?	
Will this activity produce reusable resources?	

## References

Collis B. & Moonen J. (2001), *Flexible Learning in a Digital World*, Kogan Page, London.

Salmon G. (2002), *E-tivities: the key to active online learning*, Kogan Page, London

## Further Reading

Boyle T. (1997) *Design for Multimedia Learning*, Prentice Hall, London

Learning & Teaching Support Network (LTSN) (2002), Starter Guides -

*Using the WWW in Learning & Teaching:*

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/elearning/docs/WWW.pdf>

*Virtual Learning Environments*

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/elearning/docs/VLEL.pdf>

*Computer-Mediated Conferencing*

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/elearning/docs/CMC.pdf>

*Using Computer Assisted Assessment*

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/elearning/docs/CAA.pdf>

Maier P., Warren A. (2000), *Integrating Technology in Learning and Teaching*, Kogan Page, London.

**The full series of GCU E-Learning Guides is available to download from [apu.gcal.ac.uk/pages/resources.htm](http://apu.gcal.ac.uk/pages/resources.htm)**

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