# Underpinning principles for course (re)design

## Introduction

The purpose of these principles is to provide guidance and examples to staff who are engaging in academic design for the forthcoming semester. The design principles are below and examples of what the principles mean in practice are provided on the following pages.

This guidance has the Active Learning Principles (VP Learning & Teaching, 2018) at its core, which in turn are based on evidence that Active Learning should help students to:

1. engage more deeply with the course material in the discipline
2. learn more effectively
3. perform better in assessment
4. develop more fully as critical thinkers

[Note: This document refers to *physical distancing* rather than *social distancing* throughout]

All of the guidance that follows, has in mind the pre-Covid strategic intent to encourage more blended approaches and so the emphasis in the guidance will be towards creating approaches and resources that staff can choose to use longer term and not design solely as a one-off for next academic session.

Overarching principle:

**To allow maximum flexibility, we will design teaching in a way that it can be delivered remotely and yet with a view to increasingly delivering in a blended mode, supporting active learning, where on-campus teaching is possible.**

*Reason: If we begin our design for blended learning but then initially need to teach remotely (so that our students start as remote learners) we will need to redesign our new designs – this is both costly (time-wise) and frustrating for all, and particularly for those new to remote and blended teaching.*

**We need to remember that our ‘new normal’ will likely still include physical distancing.** Therefore, lecture theatres of 300 students are not tenable. Indeed, even smaller class sizes delivered face-to-face are going to be a challenge. If current physical distancing guidance prevails, only around 20% of the class size can be populated and the distance between students will create a much greater psychological distance than 2m. Furthermore, the teacher will not be able to move around the room if doing so brings them any closer to the students. For example, they will not be able to stand next to a student to answer questions during a lab, unless using technology to bridge this physical gap.

Before scheduling face-to-face teaching, it is essential to think though whether more engaging, synchronous, online/virtual interactions will be more effective and can be delivered in a way that creates a consistent student experience.

## Design principles

#### Students should:

1. Be active and not passive learners (i.e. they need to do something, not just consume)
2. Have the opportunity to engage/learn with peers
3. Construct understanding by building on and expanding existing knowledge, where possible
4. Be given the chance to contribute to their learning through elements of co-design
5. Be guided towards becoming independent/self-directed learners
6. Benefit from ongoing feedback on their learning as they participate
7. Be supported in creating relationships in class, that they can build on through private study and other self-directed learning and social activities

#### The design should:

1. Keep all tools and processes as simple and robust as possible
2. Rethink how assessment of learning outcomes will work in this remote and blended environment
3. Prioritise engagement in learning over delivery of content
4. Take into account careful consideration of the difference in learning environment when there are no physical cues such as the layout of a teaching space and where the home environment often blurs with the work environment in very visible ways for students and staff
5. Embrace the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to be proactively inclusive of the diverse range of students we work with
6. Consider flexibility in terms of how and when students are able to engage, especially if they are in different time zones
7. Recognise the intensity of on-screen presence for students and for staff
8. Reflect changes in terms of learning experience, within the notional learning hours for the course

Examples of enacting design principles

Principle 1: Students should be active and not passive learners (i.e. they need to do something, not just consume)

Supporting students to be active not passive learners might include:

* Providing different pathways through the course, instead of enforcing a linear time-release presentation of course content
* Enabling students to understand how a session/unit fits within the overall course (and programme) to enable informed decision making (i.e. provide a course-map, or outline and contextualise within the program)
* Providing opportunities for students to ‘apply’ what they have learned. This could be by contributing to a discussion or considering a particular problem or issue. (This sits within the wider heading of ‘active learning’ embedded in other principles).
* Meaningful assessments (where appropriate) that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge beyond just memorised facts and figures

Principle 2: Students should have the opportunity to engage/learn with peers

Providing students with the opportunity to engage with their peers might include activities such as:

* Splitting students into small groups and asking them to work on a project together. (e.g. MS Teams)
* Asking students to post and then to critique each other’s forum posts (e.g. Moodle)
* Use elements of gamification: put students into teams and set a challenge (task) and either time it or the class votes which team has produced best content/artefact
* Contributing to a shared document or wiki (e.g. Moodle)
* Various collaborative learning strategies, e.g. Jigsaw activities, problem-based learning, team-based learning, world café, debates, role play, case-based learning (e.g. Zoom if synchronous)
* To make working with peers more inclusive, it is important to introduce the concept of working with peers/groupwork, and why it is considered beneficial. It can be useful to provide an introduction to what behaviour is expected, and to either assign certain roles to each member of the group or to encourage them to do so.

Principle 3: Students should construct understanding by building on and expanding existing knowledge, where possible

For most subjects, students already have prior knowledge about a topic. Understanding what they already know, or helping them to see how what they already know will be useful, can help you to build activities that use this prior knowledge. You might include activities such as:

* Explicitly asking students to collate what they think they know about a topic in a discussion forum
* Show your students how your course links to courses they have previously completed

Very often, understanding how prior knowledge/understanding links to what is about to come allows students to put their developing knowledge into context. You might include activities such as:

* Putting students into teams, and task them to collate knowledge around a specific topic. This way stronger students, or students who are familiar with a topic, can help students who have no prior knowledge (e.g. channels in MS Teams)

Principle 4: Students should be given the chance to contribute to their learning

Giving students the opportunity to contribute to their own learning might include activities such as:

* Allow students to make suggestions for readings (this can be done in the first week of class)
* Have students create an activity for one of the units. Have them work in groups to create a quiz or activity. The group with the best one gets full points while the rest of the class completes the assignment e.g. students in a writing class created the practice midterm exam and the students who did the best had some of their questions featured on the actual midterm

Principle 5: Students should be guided towards becoming independent/self-directed learners

For students to become self-directed learners they should be supported to develop metacognitive skills, i.e. to understand what strategies help them learn most effectively. Learning reflective practice (self-reflection) is key to becoming an independent learner.

* Have clear ILOs and criteria for assessment, and make sure students know what is expected of them
* Help students in setting achievable learning goals, and to closely monitor these goals
* Support students in identifying challenges to achievement, e.g. this could be done through a learning contract or logbook
* Build in elements of self-reflection throughout the course, e.g. by setting formal tasks using portfolios (e.g. Mahara)
* Design learning activities that help students develop independent learning skills such as time management, problem-solving, information appraisal, critical thinking, etc. to prepare them to be effective lifelong learners.

Principle 6: Students should benefit from ongoing feedback on their learning as they participate

Receiving – and acting on - feedback is one of the most important enablers of learning. You should give students the opportunity to develop ‘feedback literacy’. This might include:

* Helping students to capitalise on the opportunity for feedback, e.g. you could use feedback proformas that accompany assessment tasks (particularly formative ones), where learners ask for specific feedback and feedforward
* Build in opportunities for students to provide to- and receive feedback from their peers. Introduce this in low stakes activities to begin with, building up as knowledge and skills develop. (e.g. Aropa, or Moodle Workshop activity)

Principle 7: Students should be supported in creating relationships in class, that they can build on through private study and other self-directed learning and social activities

Supporting students to develop a sense of belonging and being part of a community of learners might include activities such as:

* Groupwork (collaborative learning) that promotes teamworking. Tasks should be designed to be complex enough to require a collaborative effort. For example, the jigsaw classroom approach requires that students research specific elements and share the outcomes of their learning with their group, producing a composite artefact for the purposes of learning and assessment (e.g. MS Teams)
* Consider using third party tools to create safe ‘social’ spaces as distinct from official learning communities on UofG approved platforms which are GDPR compliant. For example, School of Psychology offers Netflix parties and Facebook pages to welcome new students; participation is completely voluntary
* Time should be allocated to community building/’social’ spaces within a class or course. For example, induction activities at the start of the course could include opportunities for social activities
* Facilitate virtual study rooms open during specific hours students can just drop in (e.g. MS Teams, or Zoom)