

Using Brightspace to Effectively Manage Communications with Large Cohorts

Communications with learners range from their personal issues that are interfering with learning or assessment submission, through confusion about course content or resources, to explanations of essential concepts. Communications can be reactive to student inquiries or proactive in informing students about aspects of the unit (e.g. announcements or FAQs). Whatever their function and purpose, digital communications with students seem to demand increasingly greater time each year, whether courses are delivered face-to-face, are blended, or entirely online.

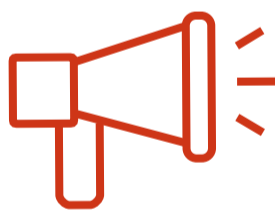
How then can instructors turn this inevitably time-consuming task of communicating with learners into something that is more manageable?

Some tips on how administrative efficiencies can be achieved with Brightspace to support communication efforts with large cohorts in an online environment:



For two-way communications on general topics such as course-related inquiries which will benefit other students enrolled in the course as well, set the expectations with your students from the start to make their posts to a designated space within the course in Brightspace i.e., the activity feed or discussions. By doing so, you can easily locate messages, send mass-replies to specific groups/sections of learners where applicable, and easily cut, paste and customize support messages and feedback previously shared into a new post.

Use the calendar tool to convey activities or events, such as assessment reminders or learning schedules. This way the calendar becomes a source of information that can build student independence and lessen the need for teacher-focused inquiries.



Use Announcements for one-way communication with learners. Course news and reminders can be posted to all learners and these announcements can be set to pop-up at a designated date and time and are then listed in reverse chronology for later reference. Learner enquiries to topics which have already been addressed in an announcement can be easily referenced back using the date and time of post. Conversely, announcements can be generated by student inquiries if they indicate that a broadcast would be an efficient communication strategy.

Use the FAQ tool to manage and share with your students ahead of time a list of course-specific Q&As once you have delivered several iterations of a course and know enough about the range of questions and problems learners are likely to have.



When engaging learners using discussions, the way you structure your discussion forums and corresponding topics is key to ensuring how easily specific content of posts are located.



For example, rather than a discussion topic on 'questions related to lectures', you could create one for each lecture. The advantages of this are that there are fewer posts in each topic, posts can be more easily read and replied to as necessary, students also have fewer posts to read, and as one discussion becomes more topical and busier, previous ones taper off.

Use intelligent agents to manage large cohorts by sending automated emails when students meet or fail to meet certain criteria within a course.



Reference: Griffin, T. & Rankine, L. (2010). Affordances for Academics: Using Learning Management Systems to Effectively Manage Large Enrollment Units in Higher Education. International J. on E-Learning 9(4), 505-528.