
Tip sheet - Communication, interaction and collaboration tools in FLO

Communication and interaction is what brings your topic to 'life'. You can prepare a topic for teaching and fill it with useful and [engaging resources](#) and activities, but until and unless there is interaction and communication within that topic, it does not really feel that anything is 'happening'. This is doubly important when a topic is delivered fully online, where it is critical to maintain a [social presence in the online space](#) with [appropriate tools](#). It is a [learning and teaching principle](#) at Flinders that students are [active, engaged and collaborative in their learning](#). For this to happen it is important to incorporate interactive and dialogic approaches in teaching.

The big idea is to build in opportunities for connecting around the topic subject matter and the processes of learning. Strategies like this attend to the students' sense of belonging and engagement with the subject matter. This might include building in opportunities for:

- Students seeing and commenting on each other's work
- Students working together collaboratively on an aspect of the topic
- Student input, feedback and choices wherever possible

There are multiple configurations of teacher-student and student-student interactions and possible associated tools (further unpacked at the end of this tip sheet), which Diana Laurillard has mapped in her ['Conversational Framework'](#) model. To simplify, we can conceive three main types or modes of interaction against which tools can be mapped: teacher-class, teacher-individual, and peer-to-peer, as shown below:

Interactions	Teacher-class	Teacher-individual	Peer-to-peer
Useful tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blog• chat• choice• Collaborate• dialogue• feedback• forum• peer & self-assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blog• chat• Collaborate• dialogue• forum (reply privately)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blog• chat• Collaborate• database• dialogue• forum• glossary• peer & self-assessment• wiki

Usually a topic will have a **mix of approaches** appropriate to the topic's teaching approach and the conditions of its delivery, which range along continuums of:

- **Time:** [Synchronous](#) and asynchronous modes (or a mix – see the [Tip sheet - Using online teaching tools to optimise face-to-face time](#))
- **Scale:** Individual, paired, [small-group](#) and whole-class interactions
- **Intensity:** Modes of passive/receptive (eg announcements) and moderate (e.g. responding in forums) through to highly dynamic interactions (e.g. co-creating content)

Two tips:

Tip one: Keep communications in FLO as a default. FLO has [a range of built-in tools](#) for communication between teaching staff and students. Using the built-in tools keeps communications in FLO and is preferable to using 'outside-FLO' methods such as direct email or social media, because in-FLO communications are historically maintained. This is important for a few reasons: students can review past topic communications (accessible for one year afterwards); as a record of the active process of teaching and learning in a topic, useful when reviewing the topic, and in preparation for a next round of delivery; and for staff review if there is a grade challenge. However, there may be times when email is the most appropriate communication mode (for instance engaging in personal matters with the students).

Tip two: Design for [accessibility and inclusivity](#); and scaffold the necessary literacies students need to understand and ‘do’ the work of the topic. Don’t assume prior skills or access to technologies; unpack tasks clearly. The basic ‘good design’ principles that apply to [creating engaging online content](#) can also be interpreted here.

Tools that support communication and interaction in FLO

- [The blog tool](#) supports **text-based asynchronous communication**. Blogs are similar to forums but are designed to display posts in reverse chronological order with threaded comments linked from entries. Blogs can be individual or class/group blogs. The conversations can be **one-on-one** between student and teacher using separate (private) individual blogs, **one to many** (blog entries in visible individual blogs), **many-to-one** (class commenting on visible individual blog entries) and **many to many** (class or group blogs). Blogs are ideal for reflecting (eg skills development) or journaling (eg experiences/observations on a placement, commenting on or reviewing current events) activities. Visible individual blogs also allow staff to blog.
- [The chat tool](#) supports **text-based synchronous communications**. It may be useful for commenting on a live event such as a presentation. There are no ‘threads’ like there are in forums; all text is organised in the order it is entered, so it can get messy if one chat stream involves multiple conversations. Ideal for curating comments or small group chats.
- [The choice tool](#) supports **selecting from a range of choices**. It can be used to collect opinions, preferences, or responses – for instance to select best times or preferred dates to help schedule a synchronous session.
- [Collaborate](#) is a **web conferencing platform** designed to be used as a **virtual classroom** that includes breakout rooms, file sharing, screen sharing, polling, and synchronous chat. It includes an always-on open room, or sessions can be scheduled for particular times. Sessions can be recorded for review or for viewing by those who can’t make the session live. With multiple [options for active engagement](#), Collaborate is ideal for ‘open office’ drop-ins, tutorial-style interactive sessions, student small group or individual presentations, Collaborate enables a face-to-face alternative online.
- [The dialogue tool](#) is for **one-on-one conversations** between students and students, and students and staff, with both parties being able to initiate a message. As a staff member you can initiate a conversation with multiple people, but responses will be private back to you only. It differs to email as these messages are kept within the topic. For example, message a group of students who did not complete a task so you can catch up individually with them to provide support if required.
- [The feedback tool](#) allows you to **survey or poll students** using multiple questions and different question types - unlike the choice tool, where only one question is allowed. Feedback tool is the only tool that allows for anonymous responses. For example, set up [Touchpoint surveys](#) periodically to ask students how they are finding their topic and if they have any problems they need help with.
- [The forum tool](#) is ideal for **asynchronous discussion**. There are five formats to suit different kinds of activities. This tool allows students and staff to initiate posts and respond to others’ posts using text, [inline recording of short audio snippets](#), embedded video/audio, images, tables, equations, and more. Forums can be used to [foster online discussion](#), or tailored for discussion around individual topics to enhance learning. For example, create a dedicated discussion forum for each assessment item. Forum posts can be rated or graded by staff, linking to gradebook. Staff can reply privately to individual students.
- [The scheduler tool](#) can be used to set up **one-on-one or group appointments** with students using the times you nominate. Students can then self-select according to their availability. For example, schedule catch-up appointments every Tuesday and Thursday morning so students can book an appointment with you if they need help, or schedule appointments for oral assessments and allow students to select the time they attend.

Tools that support collaborative work in FLO

- [The blog tool](#) allows class or group blogs where students can jointly contribute. For example, a group blog about news/media stories related to the topic.
- [The database tool](#) supports the **development of a shared, searchable collection**. The data that students enter is structured by the fields and input form that you configure. For instance, the class builds a literature collection and classifies articles against criteria that you define.
- [Collaborate](#) enables students to **work synchronously in groups**. Students can self-organise to meet in the course room, which is always available, or, sessions can be set up on their behalf – for instance, a dedicated open-ended session for each small group. To allow students to utilise Collaborate without your presence, you must setup the session with the [default role](#) of presenter so that they can share & present or moderator to allow recording. (note that all recordings in Collaborate are viewable by all students.)
- [The forum tool](#) supports **discussion over time**. The forum can be open to the whole class, or restricted to groups using either separate or visible groups. Using separate groups, the forum is private to the group whereas visible groups allows students to read all posts from all groups, but they can only post & reply to their own group. Forums allow students to work together asynchronously, useful for extended discussion that might for instance accompany shared project work. Choose forum if you need to see students' communications in FLO; ie if the development process is assessed, or if you also plan to be active in the forum.
- [The glossary tool](#), like the database tool, supports the development of a shared, searchable collection. It doesn't provide the ability for you to structure the information that students input but does feature the ability to generate links between created glossary entries and text in the topic site. This makes it especially useful for **organising definitions and extra resources** associated to key subject-related technical terms.
- [The group self-selection tool](#) allows students to **enrol themselves into a group**. For example, students could nominate which laboratory session they will attend, then these session groups could be used for group projects throughout the study period.
- [The self and peer assessment tool](#) can be used for students to **assess themselves and each other** as part of the learning process. This tool scaffolds the process of submission, allocation, appraisal and moderation. For example, working in groups of four, students complete a role-play exercise, then use the self and peer assessment tool to provide feedback to each member of the group, and assess how they worked as a team.
- [The wiki tool](#) enables students to **co-create webpages** within FLO. Wikis can be constructed by individuals or groups and are good for tracking group work, as the version history for pages allows you to easily see who contributed what. For example, students working in a group must review a scenario, research possible solutions, and develop a wiki to communicate their chosen solution in depth.

Resources

Laurillard, Diana 2009, [The Conversational Framework: an approach to evaluating e-assessment patterns in terms of learning theory](#), SlideShare, May 3

[Thinking about the students: Three essentials in the move on-line](#)

Nugent, A., Lodge, J., Carroll, A., Bagraith, R., MacMahon, S., Matthews, K. E., & Sah, P. (2018). [Higher education learning framework: an evidence informed model for university learning](#). Retrieved from Science of Learning Research Centre (see page 23 for section on interactive learning)