Estimating online learning time – how long will it take my students?

Why think about online learning time?
When you move to teaching online, it’s worth taking time to think about how long online activities will take your students. Some tasks will take a bit longer online than face to face, as students get used to new systems, or gain confidence. Planning time well will avoid overloading your students, and will help you keep a good rhythm to your online teaching.

Things to consider

Orientation time
At the start of the unit, it might take your students longer to work out what they need to do, or where they need to look. Factor this time in and make your initial tasks easy and quick to help them gain confidence.

Reading time
Be realistic about the length of texts you ask students to read in addition to the online task they have to complete (eg a discussion task), particularly for students who have English as an additional language.

Thinking time
Some students jump right into an online task, but others like to have time to think, particularly when writing their thoughts, which are more permanent than spoken conversation. Allow students enough time to consider before expecting a response.

Interaction time
Interacting online in a discussion takes time. Students need to read others’ responses, consider them, think about ways to respond, reply, and read others’ replies. This can happen over several days, if the discussion is not run synchronously (ie live, at a designated time).

Putting it together
When you plan your online activity, try to add together all the time needed to complete the task. Give students a realistic expectation of how long it will take, so they can plan studies.

A discussion task involving reading at text, answering questions in a discussion forum and replying to others might look like this:

- Orientation time = 5 minutes (understand the prompt, find the resources)
- Reading time = 30 minutes (depending on the text given)
- Thinking time = 20 minutes (to craft their response)
- Interaction time = 30 minutes (to post their responses, read others and reply)

Total activity time = 1 hour and 25 minutes

Further information
For help with how to implement online tasks and activities, see the full list of DEO guides.