Establishing a healthy Virtual Learning Community (VLC)

The emphasis in a planned remote course is to establish a healthy Virtual Learning Community (VLC). A VLC makes the remote learning experience more personal and meaningful, allowing for a sense of belonging, which helps students to remain engaged in the learning process. For this reason, your role is to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to interact with each other and the course material.

This page provides some tip & tricks to help you facilitate your VLC using the remote technology tools available to you:

Setting Up Your VLC (things to consider doing first)

1. **Create an Ice Breaker Discussion Thread in [Blackboard](#) or [Canvas](#)**
    - Have everyone in the class introduce themselves.
    - Explain the importance of getting to know one another and provide prompts students can respond to like:
        > Introduce yourself to the class. Say where you are located and why you took this course.
        > Introduce yourself to the class and share one thing you're excited about and one thing you are fearful about to be in a planned remote class.
    - Encourage students to share a picture of themselves.
    - Remember to place a word limit on responses, especially if class sizes are big.
    - To be sure these introductory posts are being read by others, have students respond to at least two other posts. This sets the tone for all future discussion threads where students will be expected to respond to the comments of others.

2. **Meet with Students using [WebEx](#) or create a Panopto introduction**
    - This real time or pre-recorded session gives you an opportunity to introduce yourself to the class and helps students put a name to a face.
    - During this session, provide clear instructions about your expectations
    - Set firm deadlines. Deadlines help students to stay on track and to work at the same pace.
    - Read through the syllabus
    - Remember to leave time for Q&A

3. **Set up Groups to make things more manageable in [Blackboard](#) or [Canvas](#)**
    - Sometimes class size exceeds what is manageable in terms of being able to read and/or respond to all discussion posts.
    - Creating groups achieves two things:
        > Students like the affiliation they feel to their group which enhances their sense of community,
        > Groups are easier for instructors or TA's to manage.
    - Groups can be randomly assigned, instructor assigned or self-assigned.
    - Benefits of Groups:
        > Encourages collaboration and interaction among students, and
        > Decreases some student anxiety or (be aware it might increase for others),

> Members can take turns to moderate discussions

Facilitating the VLC (all subsequent weeks)

The Discussion Board is your best friend in Blackboard and Canvas
- Post Discussion threads that correspond to the content covered in each class or thematically.
- Have students respond to prompts/questions about the readings provided.
  OR
- Create Groups and have students take turns to provide the prompts.
- Give clear instructions about discussions.
  > Word limits,
  > Weekly deadlines (for example: Respond by to initial post by Tuesday; Respond to others by Thursday).
- Conventional wisdom is to have students respond to the initial prompt before responding to others. This helps limit copycat threads.

Resources:
https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/alternatives-lecturing/discussions/collaborative-online-learning

https://teachonline.ca/sites/default/files/tools-trends/downloads/how_to_plan_for_and_moderate_online_discussions.pdf

Tips for Managing your Remote Class

1. Record and Upload lectures (Panopto)
2. Upload Content to Blackboard or Canvas - lecture slides/readings/resource links, etc.
3. Send email reminders, especially about due dates
4. Update the Announcement Board regularly (Mondays are good to set the tone for the week) in Blackboard or Canvas
   > Change your course landing page in Blackboard to Announcements
5. Hold regular office hours
   > Provide a link to your WebEx Meeting Room that is easily accessible
   > Provide a phone number for those who cannot access WebEx
6. Provide clear instructions, especially about assignments (Blackboard and Canvas) and assessments (Blackboard and Canvas)
   > Syllabus
   > Rubrics in Blackboard or Canvas
7. Provide timely Feedback with sufficient time for students to resubmit assignments
8. Keep the Gradebook in Blackboard or Canvas up to date.

Resources:
https://www2.uwstout.edu/content/profdev/rubrics/time_management.html
https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/rubrics.html