

# “THEY JUST NEED TO KNOW THAT SOMEONE IS THERE”: SUPPORTING ONLINE STUDENTS

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## PROFILE

Kathleen Murray is a tutor on the BA Childhood Practice and BA Child and Youth Studies, as well as teaching several FE courses. She has been nominated several times in the student-led teaching awards including for ‘Most inspiring lecturer’ and ‘Most engaging online tutor’ in 2016 awards.

## CONTEXT

The BA in Childhood Practice is a fully online degree programme taught entirely using the Blackboard VLE. Most students on the course are practitioners and managers working in childcare across Scotland who are studying part time.

## ALWAYS RESPOND

Students need to know that they are being listened to, so I respond to all emails and discussion board posts as quickly as I can. I try and check the Blackboard VLE every day if I can. It can take a lot of courage for someone to post something on the discussion board and it is dispiriting for them if no one responds, so I always make sure that I am monitoring this. I have also set up alerts in Blackboard so that I get an email every time something is posted so I can keep on top of things.

It can get busy with emails, so I have a constant ‘out of office’ message on which tells students to give me a nudge if they haven’t heard back from me in 48 hours. This way, students’ expectations are managed, and if I miss an email because I am busy, I’ll usually be reminded that I need to respond.

## TALK TO OTHER STAFF

Alice (Mongiello, Programme Leader) and I have been working with each other for a number of years, and we also interact with each other on the discussion board, as well as with the students. I will often respond to something that Alice has posted, or bring her in to a discussion by asking a direct questions. I think that students like to see that the staff are engaged with each other as it makes them feel part of a learning community.

## BE HUMAN

Communicating online can be quite sterile and emotionless if you let it. As humans we are used to reading people’s facial expressions and body language so when this

is missing you have to add these details in to the interactions that you are having by text. If someone’s discussion board post has been touching or humorous then I mention that in my response (“I am sitting here smiling...”). I also like to draw on my personal experiences for some of my discussion board posts. It makes the students realise that I am a person with a life and a history as well as just a tutor, and makes it easier for them to connect with me. I know that I have successful relationships with my students because so many give me feedback about how I have helped them succeed. I also get students who have withdrawn from study approaching me about coming back again. It’s great that I am a ‘friendly face’ who can help them to re-engage.



## **TREAT STUDENTS EQUALLY**

Because of the large numbers on the programme, we split students in to smaller groups, but are always conscious that each group is getting the same level of ‘service’ from us. Students talk to each other and are very perceptive about any little differences: all feedback is handed back at exactly the same time, we have fair and consistent assessment approaches, and open communication with all our students.

**If you wish to submit your own case study, or have any questions about this resource please contact:**

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