First year tertiary students are generally full-time students from diverse academic, social and cultural backgrounds who have made a direct transition from school to university. Many are international students who have English as their second language. Most are geographically separated from their secondary school cohort. The majority initially experience some degree of social isolation, and until they find their niche are proverbially “little fish in a big pond”.

The broad interdisciplinary curricula design of first level courses does not necessarily seek to promote student engagement. Such curricula do little more than present vital foundational material and concepts that can be expanded on in later years of their degree program. While this approach caters for the diverse background of students by providing them with a holistic conception of the discipline, are we merely promoting a learning culture where students do little more than memorise terms and concepts, with little opportunity to explore and question ideas with fellow students and faculty? (Dearn, 1995)

It is well documented that socially interacting with peers is positively correlated with enhanced motivation and persistence to learn. By learning in an environment with supportive mentors / facilitators, students gain confidence in their own ability to process the course material and are thus encouraged to take control of their own learning (Ramsden, 1992). How should this peer-to-peer facilitated learning environment be structured to attain optimal levels of student engagement? Points for discussion could include:

- Should student learning be mediated by interactions with more competent peers (or near-peers) who are at a level of understanding just beyond that of the students themselves? Is there any evidence that interaction between student cohorts from different years of a degree programme contribute to social integration of first year students at university?

- What are the relative merits of academic versus social integration in enhancing student engagement? Does peer networking / peer interaction contribute to a sense of community? How can computer mediated instructional tasks / discussion groups be structured to support and enhance student networking and learning?


Should peers be the face of first year learning?
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Round Table