Getting started with teaching

One way or another, many colleagues start their teaching careers in higher education by getting ‘thrown in at the deep end’. For many, within weeks or days of taking up their posts, there are lectures to be given, tutorials or seminars to lead, or marking of students’ work to be done. Sometimes they face these prospects without having had any opportunity to learn how to tackle such challenges. Relevant staff development opportunities may not always be in time for those critical first experiences of teaching or assessing.

Our aim in this booklet is to help you to cope well with those first few critical elements of your work in teaching in higher education. It’s been adapted, from original materials by Professor Phil Race and in collaboration with him, by the University of Exeter’s Academic Development team within Education Enhancement, and we warmly welcome your feedback on eeu@exeter.ac.uk.

Intended learning outcomes of this resource

When you’ve used the ideas and suggestions in these pages, you should be better able to:

1. Feel more confident and relaxed about starting to teach in higher education.

2. Prepare for, and give your first lectures and classes effectively and successfully.

3. Undertake your first elements of marking systematically, fairly and efficiently.

4. Give useful feedback to your students, to help them learn successfully.

5. Continue to develop your teaching and assessing practices systematically and professionally.

6. Know how to access further resources and taught courses on all aspects of teaching, student support and assessment within the University.

‘I know my stuff – isn’t that enough?’

Colleagues in a wide range of roles and contexts are teaching and supporting students’ learning at the University of Exeter. You may be an academic or teaching fellow, a post doc or technical specialist with teaching responsibilities, a graduate teaching assistant or demonstrator, a specialist tutor or assessor, or a skills or library adviser. Whatever your role, you may feel that you were appointed on the basis of your research and/or professional expertise, rather than because of a teaching background. Even if you do have some teaching experience, it can seem rather daunting a prospect either to step up onto the podium in a large lecture theatre, or take home a big pile of students’ work to mark.

Even more challenging, the stuff you know backwards is unlikely to be at the heart of the material you need to be able to teach.
It is probable that at least some of the content you need to teach will be new even to you, and you may be surprised by how long it can take to put together a lecture or session on a topic you’ve never studied directly before.

Who can help me?

More often than not, you’ll find someone in your College or department who will be a real help. You should have a mentor or line manager – an experienced colleague to guide you through those first teaching experiences. And you may be taking over a role from someone else who’s still around to show you how it has been done in the past. But sometimes you may feel isolated and will understandably look for additional ideas and advice, and this is where Education Enhancement – and this resource – can help.

Education Enhancement is a group of colleagues within the University of Exeter whose aim is to enhance learning and teaching for both staff and students. The Academic Development team, which forms part of Education Enhancement, aims to offer research-informed guidance for all staff whose role involves any kind of teaching. We’re committed to the principles of active, research-led teaching, in line with the University’s Education Strategy, and to developing inspirational approaches for engaging our students in the intellectual enquiry and skills development needed for our subject disciplines. Whether you’re teaching first-year undergraduates or postgraduate research students, you’re drawing them into a rich learning and research community.

We can work alongside you, in Colleges and services, to help achieve the very high quality of education appropriate for a top-10 university. Each College has an Education Adviser based in Education Enhancement for full details, and to find out more about what we do and the resources we provide, please visit the Education Enhancement website at www.exeter.ac.uk.

As you may know, the taught programmes are available – and, in some cases, compulsory – for staff and postgraduate research students who teach and support learning at the University. Staff undertake the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP) programme, while postgraduate research students who teach take the Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) programme. Both are accredited by the Higher Education Academy. Find details of PCAP, LTHE and other teaching-related sessions at www.exeter.ac.uk or by contacting eeu@exeter.ac.uk.

Before getting into the main part of this resource, it could be useful for you to look through the checklist below, to help you to establish where you are now, and what your immediate priorities will be. Some of the question topics may not yet be applicable to you, but they may become relevant later. And don’t worry if looking at the list makes you feel that there are too many challenges – the rest of this booklet aims to help you with all of them.

Where am I now?

Consider these questions and discuss with your mentor or line manager afterwards. For each question you should think about how applicable it is to your current situation. What do you need to do now to make sure that you can carry out your role effectively?

Lectures
1. Have you got lectures to prepare?
2. Do you know roughly how many lectures, and with how many students?
3. Will you have one or more series of lectures with the same group of students?
4. Have you got the intended learning outcomes for these lectures?
5. Have you given lectures before on this topic?
6. Have you got handout material on this topic?
7. Have you got slides or overheads on this topic?
8. Are you already able to make PowerPoint slides yourself?
9. Will you be involved in setting assessment questions in connection with your lectures?

Small group teaching
1. Have you classes such as tutorials, seminars or practical sessions to prepare?
2. Do you know roughly how many classes and how many students?
3. Do you know where these fit into the overall module or programme?
4. Do you know the intended learning outcomes for these sessions?
5. Are you already able to make PowerPoint slides yourself?
6. Will you be involved in setting assessment questions in connection with your lectures?

Marking, assessment and feedback
1. Will you have marking to do?
2. Have you already experience of marking students’ work and giving them feedback?
3. Approximately how many students’ work will you have to mark?
4. Will you be giving the related lectures, or just some of them, or will other colleagues be doing the lectures?

Add your own questions and concerns here.
Getting started with lectures

For many staff in higher education, lectures are the central part of their teaching. Even if you’re new to higher education teaching, you’ve probably done something similar before. For example, you may have given presentations at conferences, which in many respects could be thought of as a similar activity. Actually, giving conference presentations is rather more scary, as the audience is likely to know a lot more about the subject than is typical of students at a lecture.

However, many people find the prospect of giving their first lectures quite daunting. The thought of an hour under the spotlight seems like a long time. In practice, even though the University timetables lectures for one-hour slots, it’s rarely an hour in practice, as it can take a few minutes to get everyone settled into the room, and you need the venue to be ready for the next class in reasonable time.

Note-making rather than note-taking

Left to themselves, your students will often simply try to ‘capture’ note-making rather than note-taking. This, however, is just note-taking. Comfortable as it is to have a roomful of people writing down what you say, not all real learning is likely to be occurring. Students can do much more than just copy actions without actually thinking much at all about what they’re writing down. It is better to help your students to make notes rather than just take notes. For example, now and then during your lecture, give them a couple of minutes to make a summary of what you’ve been talking about. It can then be useful to ask them to compare their summaries with students sitting close to them, and to add to their own any interesting or important points that they may have missed.

Don’t just ‘lecture’

A notional one-hour lecture doesn’t boil down to sixty minutes worth of ‘content’, as the intended outcomes need to be introduced and then de-briefed, and your class needs to settle in, and leave. So we’re normally thinking about no more than say 45 minutes for the ‘delivery’ part of your lecture. But in practice, 45 minutes is too long for you and your students to ‘receive’. Concentration spans are much shorter than 45 minutes. It is better to break your lecture down into some shorter elements involving a combination of teaching methods, for example no more than ten minutes at a time of your talking to your students, interspersed with getting them to do things, for example open discussion, demonstrations, visual concept-mapping and exercises. Already the scary prospect of giving a one-hour lecture is much more manageable – all you need to do is to manage a few episodes of talking to your students, and intersperse a few episodes of them doing things (giving you the chance to catch your breath, regain your composure, and plan what exactly to do next).

Begin (and end) with the intended learning outcomes

It’s good practice to explain to your students what they should be getting out of any class, including lectures. Although module descriptors already express intended learning in terms of outcomes, these are sometimes not particularly clear. For example, they may be expressed in rather vague terms, such as students will deepen their understanding of…’. To start a lecture well, it is much better to be able to say to the students: by the end of this lecture, you’ll be able to…’ and then to list three or four things your students should be able to do by the end of that particular lecture, as a direct result of being there and of the learning experiences they have in the session. There are all sorts of ‘doing’ words and phrases which help to clarify what ‘understand’ may have meant in the published versions (see Hint for more ideas).

The intended learning outcomes can also take care of your last few minutes. Near the scheduled end of the lecture, it is useful to return to your slide of the intended outcomes.

Hint

More ideas for ‘intended learning outcomes’, together with a range of resources on different aspects of teaching and learning, are available from another University resource. This is the Learning and Teaching in HE virtual learning environment, LTHE, which can be found at http://vle.exeter.ac.uk

Sign up with your usual username and password. Select ‘University Resources’ from the Course Categories in the left-hand block: this will take you to the homepage of the LTHE programme.

Large-group teaching

It’s useful to let students see the intended learning outcomes as well as hear them. For example, show them as a slide, but also talk the class through them, making the most of tone of voice and body language to help your students to see what the intended outcomes actually mean in practice. Don’t just read the slide out to them, however – students can read from a screen or a handout faster than we can talk, and get quite bored (or even irritated) if we read out to them things they can already see for themselves.

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Making the most of handouts

Students like handouts. Sometimes handout materials are issued directly in lectures. Sometimes, handouts are made available to students before lectures – in print, or electronically. They may be issued at the end of lectures, or placed on ELE, the University’s virtual learning environment – ask for advice on this from your College or service.

The trouble with handouts is that your students can switch off mentally during your lectures if they feel that all of the information is in their handouts. When students coming out of lectures are asked, ‘tell me what the lecture was about?’ they admit, ‘sorry, I don’t know – I’ve got the handout, but I haven’t read it properly yet’.

If they have the paper versions with them at the lecture, it can be quite tedious for them if you simply talk through what they have. It is much better to make sure that what they take away from the lecture is more than just the information in their handouts. Rather than actually print the task briefings on the handout materials, it works better simply to put ‘Task 1’, ‘Task 2’ and so on in the empty boxes. This helps to stop students getting ahead of where you want them to be, but more usefully it gives you the chance to adjust the actual tasks depending on how the class seems to be getting on with the subject, and depending on the amount of time you find you have available.

It’s useful, too, to have slides ready for a few alternative tasks, so that you can decide exactly what you want the class to do at each particular time. Also, if your students happen to ask an important question, for example, you can sometimes turn it into a task for all of them to try for a couple of minutes, before you answer the question. (This sometimes gives you the luxury of a couple of minutes to get your own answer ready.)

Designing slides for lectures

Most lecturers use slides or overheads to ‘signpost’ key ideas, references and so on. In particular, PowerPoint presentations have become the norm. In some subjects, slides can be quite sophisticated, containing diagrams, photos and graphs, charts, and other sorts of visual information. In other subjects, they tend to be mostly print on the screen, often ‘bullet points’ giving the main sub-topics that are going to be discussed, or questions which are going to be addressed in the lecture. However, it can get quite boring for students if the slides are just print, and most lecturers now deliberately put visual stimulus on at least some of their slides.

Slides allow your students to see things on the screen at the same time as they hear about them from you, and this means a better chance of your students making sense there and then of the topic in hand. Usually, you can see your slides on a computer screen in front of you, without turning round to the main screen onto which the image is projected, which means you can talk about your slides without turning your back on your audience.

Slides are also a useful comfort blanket for us as university teachers. A well-produced set of slides gives an immediate impression of a professional and credible lecture, even when we’re new at it. Slides can also be a way of making our lectures much more flexible, and allowing us to respond to what actually happens in the session. For example, it can be useful to have prepared (say) 30 slides, but only to intend to use 20 of them at the lecture, with the others being there in case there is time to go into more depth about particular aspects, or to have a ready answer available for anticipated questions from your students. Don’t be a slave to your own electronic presentation – effective communication is always flexible and responsive.

Hint

If using PowerPoint, prepare paper copies of all of your slides, say two per page, and lay those out in front of you if possible at the start of your lecture. Write clearly the numbers of the slides on your paper copies. When giving your presentation, you can go to any slide at any time, and in any order, simply by keying in ‘5’ then ‘enter’ to go to slide 5, ‘23’ for slide 23, and so on. This is particularly useful when students ask a question and you may want to go back to an earlier slide, or for when time is running out and you want to skip ahead to a later slide, and so on. It gives you full control of which slides you show when, without having to clumsily run backwards or forwards though slides you’re not actually going to use on that occasion.
Ten tips for good slides

1. Don’t put too much on any slide. A few questions, headlines or bullet points are better than solid paragraphs. Detailed information is best left to handout materials.

2. Use large fonts, to ensure that everything can be read from the back of the room. Check this out – or get a colleague to run quickly through your slides with you sitting at the back yourself.

3. Check which colours work well. Some text colours (notably orange and red) don’t come across clearly at the back of the room. The software allows you to have dark text against light backgrounds and vice-versa. However, light text against dark backgrounds works rather badly if you can’t dim the lighting in the lecture room. Check this out – or get a colleague to sit in on colleagues’ lectures, and conference presentations, and see what works well for others – and what doesn’t.

4. Try to fill only the top two-thirds of any slide. Students may have to peer around each other’s heads to see anything right at the bottom of a slide.

5. Use pictures, cartoons, and graphs, when they help to bring your subject to life.

6. Don’t include detailed graphs, tables or flowcharts, if the detail is better in handout materials than on-screen in the lecture room.

7. Don’t include ‘slide numbers’ on slides. This gives you the freedom to pick-and-mix your slides, without your students realising that you’re skipping some of them.

8. Don’t always issue handout copies of your slides in advance. This robs you of opportunities to surprise your students with unexpected quotations, or even ‘fun’ slides. But remember that issuing handouts in advance will ensure that your classes are as accessible as possible; visually impaired students will appreciate advance copies, for example.

9. Don’t cause ‘death by bullet point’. It gets tedious for students or are answering a question from your audience. It then just becomes a distraction for your students. An easy way of switching your slides off when using PowerPoint is to press ‘B’ on the keyboard – ‘B’ for black.

When you want your slide back, all you need to do is press ‘B’ again – ‘B’ for back. This is far safer than risking switching off the data projector with its remote control – some machines take minutes to warm up again if switched off.

Questions and answers in lectures

A good lecture should be a shared learning experience for all present. Another way of putting this is that any student who misses the lecture should have missed something much more than just the Powerpoint slides, or handouts. Those who did attend should emerge with much more than just the information on the slides or handouts.

Questions and answers work both ways. During your lecture, you’regototheopportunitytohelpyourstudentsattothink, and asking them questions helps them to make sense of the topic, and lets you know how well they are doing so, and alerts you to areas where they are not yet succeeding to get their heads round the subject material being addressed. Allowing and indeed encouraging students to ask you questions helps you to find out what your students still need from you on their journey towards achieving the intended learning outcomes.

Questions and answers work both ways. During your lecture, you’re got the opportunity to help your students to think, and asking them questions helps them to make sense of the topic, and lets you know how well they are doing so, and alerts you to areas where they are not yet succeeding to get their heads round the subject material being addressed. Allowing and indeed encouraging students to ask you questions helps you to find out what your students still need from you on their journey towards achieving the intended learning outcomes.

Getting students to ask you questions

What not to do: just ask ‘any questions?’ now and then. Why not? Usually there’s no response, especially if you ask towards the end of your lecture. Students are likely simply to take your question as a sign to start packing up their pens, handouts, and kit. Also, when students do take advantage of your offer to respond to their questions, you tend to get questions from the relatively confident students, who aren’t usually the ones who need most to have their questions answered. On the whole, students are shy at asking questions in lectures, not least because of the fear that they may ask a ‘stupid’ question and then feel embarrassed. Even when we assure them ‘better to feel stupid for a moment than to remain ignorant for a lifetime’, voicing a question in a lecture is a risky prospect for most students. That’s why they tend to come up to you at the end and ask their questions individually – but with schedules to keep, and the next class coming in shortly, that’s not an ideal alternative in practice.

Some suggestions for when students do ask you questions in lectures include:

• Repeat the question to everyone – many may not have heard the question, and your answer won’t make any sense if they don’t know the question;

• Even if it is a stupid question, don’t make its owner feel stupid – just answer it quickly and kindly;

• Try to fill only the top two-thirds of any slide. Students may have to peer around each other’s heads to see anything right at the bottom of a slide.

• Use pictures, cartoons, and graphs, when they help to bring your subject to life.

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• Try to fill only the top two-thirds of any slide. Students may have to peer around each other’s heads to see anything right at the bottom of a slide.

• Use pictures, cartoons, and graphs, when they help to bring your subject to life.
If you don’t know the answer, don’t make one up – say that you’ll find out, or ask if anyone else has an answer.

**Hint**
You can find additional ideas for involving students in lectures, even in very large classes, on the Learning and Teaching in HE ELE (see the tip on pg 5 on how to access that site).

**Getting students to answer your questions**

In large group lectures in particular, students can be quite reticent about answering your questions. They may fear looking stupid, or ‘being caught out’ when they haven’t been paying attention, and so on.

Here are some ‘don’ts’ for asking questions in your lectures.

- Don’t ask the whole class a question then simply answer it yourself. That just causes the class not to take your questions seriously.
- Don’t pick on the same students each time – for example the ones who happen to have eye-contact with you. That just discourages students from looking at you.
- Don’t just pick on students near to you – that allows those at the back to become even more switched-off than they may be already. Ask specifically for a question from the back of the room, or the far right-hand side.

**Question, pause, pounce!**

The best way to ask students questions in your lecture is this three-stage approach:

1. Ask the question and be explicit about thinking time, e.g. 30 seconds. This way, you control the time – it’s not empty silence;
2. Wait for enough time for most students to be ready to give at least some level of answer;
3. Pounce – pick a student at random. This means more students think of an answer – their learning is more active.

**Hint**
Where possible, show your questions on-screen, so that students can see it as well as hear it. It also makes the questions seem more important to students, and they’re more likely to take on board that these are questions that they need to become able to answer.

**Another hint**

If you’re using handouts in your lecture, it only takes a minute or two to pencil onto (say) the top right-hand corner of each copy a number, 1 to 257 for example. You can then ask students to note the number on their handout, and also to notice the numbers on their neighbours’ handouts.

You can then ask your question, pause for a moment, then say, “who has handout number 78, please?” You may notice this particular student ‘shrinking’, but people close by will point out the student concerned. Then when you’ve asked your next question, you can return to the owner of handout 78 and ask “now you pick a number between 1 and 257 please”, and from one on it on it is a matter of you picking on particular students – they have ownership of the process.

Don’t, however, intimidate students

When you pick a student who can’t (or won’t) answer a particular question, move on fairly quickly to another student. If students come to fear the prospect of being asked a question in a large-group situation, they may well opt not to attend at all!

**More tips on giving lectures (adapted from Race, 2005)**

1. Always link lectures to assessment. Give students cues and clues about how this particular lecture ‘counts’ in due course. Whenever you say, “You’ll need today’s material for exam questions like so-and-so”, you’ll notice students sitting down.
2. Lecturers should be seen and heard. Like a mike it helps. Don’t just say ‘can you hear me at the back?’ – ask someone in the back now a question and find out. And don’t dim the lights to show your slides at the expense of students no longer being able to see you.
3. Try to cause the students to like you. Smile. Be human. Look at them. Respond to them. If they like you, they’re more likely to come to your next lecture too. If they don’t, then they’re more likely to come to your next lecture too.
4. Think of what students will be doing during the lecture. Don’t worry too much about what you will be doing, plan to get your students’ brains engaged. Cat them making decisions, guessing causes of phenomena, trying out applying clear, solving problems and so on. They’ll learn more from what they do than from what you tell them.
5. Don’t put too much into the lecture. It’s better to get students thinking deeply about a couple of important things, than to tell them about half-a-dozen things and lose their attention.
6. Bring in some appropriate humour. The odd funny slide, or amusing anecdote, or play on words can work wonders at restoring students’ concentration levels. Then follow something funny up with an important point, while you’ve still got their full attention. But don’t use humour if it’s not working.

7. Keep yourself tuned into WIIFM. ‘What’s in it for me?’ is a perfectly intelligent question for any student to have in mind. Always make time to remind students about why a topic is included, and how it will help them in due course.

8. Don’t over-run. At least some of your students are likely to have something else to go to after your lecture, and perhaps with not much of a margin for error. If you come to a good stopping place and there are 15 minutes left, do your closing bit and stop. Students actually like lectures which finish early now and then.

9. Pave the way towards your next lecture. After reviewing what students should have got out of the present lecture, show (for example) a slide with three questions which will be covered in next week’s instalment.

Problems in lectures: ‘what can I do when…?’

Next we’ll look at some of the most frequently occurring problems which lecturers experience. Some of these problems are the sorts of nightmares about lecturing which many new lecturers have. In each case, we suggest three or four suggested ways of getting round the problem – leaving you to take your pick of which would suit you best – or think of your own better way round the problem.

What can I do when I’m feeling very nervous?

You’re not alone. Even many very experienced lecturers are quite nervous, especially with a new group, or with a subject they don’t know particularly well. Some tactics which can help include:

• Smile! You’ll notice that at least some of the students will smile back – this immediately makes you feel better.

• Have good prompts available. It’s reassuring to have (for example) a list of your slides, so that you won’t be nervous about losing your place in the lecture.

• Ad-lib an explanation of the importance of a point you’ve just recently been making. Sometimes the very fact that you’re making a spontaneous addition is relaxing in its own right.

• Bring in your students. For example, ask them a question along the lines “How many of you have already come across…?” or “How many of you have never yet heard of…?”.

• Don’t be afraid to pause for a short while, and take a deep (quiet) breath.

What can I do when I forget where I am in my lecture?

This happens to most lecturers now and then, so don’t feel that there’s something wrong with you if it happens to you. Your choices include:

• Give your students something to do for a couple of minutes. For example, have a slide already prepared for such an eventuality. Make the activity seem a perfectly natural step for your students, for example by saying, “Now would be a really good time for you to think for a minute or two about…” and then put up your task briefing. While the students are doing the task, you’ve got time to sort out where you are, and get ready to resume your lecture after debriefing students’ work on the short task.

• Minimise the chance of losing where you are by having a print-out of your slides, so that you can quite quickly see what you’ve done and what you were talking about.

• Ask students to jot down the two most important things they’ve learned so far from your lecture. Then ask them to compare with those sitting close to them. Then ask for volunteers to tell you what they chose as these things. This often helps you to regain a feel for exactly what had been happening in their minds up to the point at which you lost your way.

• If you’re very confident, you could say, “oops, I’ve lost it! Anyone like to remind me what I was going to say next?” At least then, you’ll have the full attention of your students for a moment – and they normally respond well to you just being human.

What can I do when I don’t know the answer to the student’s question?

A common nightmare. You’ll feel less concerned about this as you gain experience – but the following tactics can take away some of any worries you may have about this.

• Give yourself time to think. Repeat the question to everyone, as other students may not have heard the question. Sometimes this extra time is enough to give you a chance to think of how you may respond.

• Don’t try to make an answer up. If it turns out to be wrong, or if you get stuck in the process, you will soon have the full attention of all of the students – not what you really want at this stage.

• Say, “this is a really good question. How many of you can respond to this?” and look for volunteers. Often there will be someone there who is willing answer it.

• Break it down into smaller bits. Then start by responding to one of the bits where you do have something to say. If it’s a question that your students don’t actually need to know an
What can I do if students repeatedly come in late, and disrupt my lecture?

This is a balancing act. There will usually be some students who arrive late on a regular basis. You could try to absorb this, especially if you can’t move the time of the lectures themselves. However, if certain students are consistently arriving late, and disrupt your lecture?

What can I do if attendance drops off during a series of lectures?

It could be, of course, that your students are getting bored – or tired – or are busy trying to catch up ready for someone else’s assignment deadline. Whatever the cause of absenteeism, one or more of the following tactics may help:

- Ask for help. “Anyone know how to fix this please?” quite often brings a competent volunteer from the floor. Sometimes, you can ring up technical support, but it remains advisable to give the students something else to do until help materialises.
- Recognise when the problem is terminal – for example when the bulb has failed in a ceiling-mounted data projector.
- If it’s towards the end of a session, wind up. Remind your students of the intended learning outcomes, and promise to cover anything important that remains outstanding on a future occasion – or to just the relevant slides onto ELE. Your students won’t mind your stopping early!

What can I do when the technology lets me down?

For example, your PowerPoint slides disappear, or freeze. The thing not to do is to struggle for ages, with the undivided attention of the whole group. It’s a good idea always to have more of the following tactics at your disposal:

- Start the talk again from scratch. Alternatives include:
  - Smile, rather than sweat. Even if inside you’re quite tense about it, it’s best to give the impression of being cool about it,
  - Don’t just carry on trying to ignore it. That often makes the situation worse. Pause, looking at the people who are talking until they stop – or until the other students shut them up.
- Give your students a discussion task to do – something to talk about those sitting next to them – a decision to reach, a problem to solve, and so on. It’s a good idea always to have some tips ready and waiting. Then when they’re all busy and eyes are off you, you can try to rescue the technology...
• Acknowledge that you may have been talking yourself for too long, and give them something to talk about with near neighbours. In other words, legitimise their talking for a few minutes, and let them get the need to talk out of their system.

• Note any persistent ‘talkers’ but resist the temptation to confront them in front of the whole group. Instead, find a time to talk to them on their own, and explore how they’re finding your lectures.

• Don’t ask an ‘offender’ to leave. If they actually refuse to leave, you’ll have a much more difficult problem to deal with. Never issue a threat that you would not in practice be able to implement.

What can I do if I come to the end and there are still 15 minutes to go?

Possibilities include:

• Say, “This is a good place to stop this particular session” and re-visit the intended learning outcomes for a moment or two, then wind up. Your students will not be terminally disappointed.

• Have with you a revision activity – for example a set of short, sharp quiz questions on your lectures to date with the group, and give them a quick-fire quiz until the time has been used up.

• Give out post-its, and ask students to write any questions they would like to ask about the subject on them, and pass the post-its down to you. Choose which questions to answer to the whole group until the time is used up.

• Put up a slide of a past exam question on the topic you’ve been covering, and explain to students a little about what you are expecting in answers to that question.

• Ask the students to write down the two most important things they know now, that they didn’t know when the lecture started. Then get them to compare with their neighbours, and invite volunteers to read out a few such things.

Give a brief overview of what’s coming next – for example showing the students the intended learning outcomes for the next couple of lectures.

Checklist: preparing your lecture

Consider these questions and discuss with your mentor or line manager afterwards. For each question you should think about how applicable it is to your current situation. What do you need to do now to make sure that you can carry out your role effectively?

1. Do I know how many lectures I will be giving to this class?
2. Do I know roughly how many students may be there?
3. Have I found out what these students are likely to know already about the topic of the lecture?
4. Do I know where my particular lecture fits in to the overall course or module my students are studying?
5. Have I been to see the actual lecture room I expect to be using?
6. Have I got the published intended learning outcomes for this lecture, if any, and at least those in the module specification?
7. Have I turned these into the actual intended learning outcomes I will introduce at the start of my lecture?
8. Have I prepared slides to accompany my lecture?
9. Have I checked out that I can work the equipment I need in this particular venue? Is all the equipment already there?
10. Have I prepared any handout material I want students to have in their hands during my lecture?
11. Have I the opportunity to talk about my particular lecture to other colleagues who already work with these students?
12. Have I tested that I can be seen and heard well in this lecture venue?
13. Have I put my slides on ELE so that students can see them in advance of and after the lecture?

Review checklist: after giving the lecture

Consider these questions and discuss with your mentor or line manager afterwards. For each question you should think about how applicable it is to your current situation. What do you need to do now to make sure that you can carry out your role effectively?

1. Did I introduce and explain the intended learning outcomes clearly to the students?
2. Did I manage to speak confidently and clearly?
3. Did I give the students some things to do as part of the lecture?
4. Did my slides help the students to make sense of the subject?
5. Did I remember to switch the screen display off, when it was not needed?
6. Did my handout materials work well with the students?
Small-group teaching

As far large-group teaching, it's good practice to explain to your students in small groups what they should be getting out of the class by clarifying the intended learning outcomes (see pg 5).

However, the most significant reasons for using small group teaching are the benefits students acquire which lie beyond the curriculum as expressed through intended learning outcomes; the emergent learning outcomes associated with small group work help students to equip themselves with skills and attitudes they will need for the next stages of their careers — and lives.

Seminars and tutorials

These terms are sometimes used interchangeably for small-group sessions. However, strictly speaking, a seminar is usually meant to be a student-led small-group session, for example when one or more students gives a short presentation then answers questions and opens up discussion on a pre-assigned topic. Here, the tutor’s main responsibility is to be a facilitator or chairperson.

Tutorials come in many shapes and sizes, from one-to-one face-to-face sessions between staff and individual students, to small-group teaching-learning sessions directed largely by tutors, but with a considerable expectation of active learning by students rather than passive ‘ticking and listening’. In some disciplines, tutorials often take the form of problem-classes, where small groups of students work through quantitative problems either individually or collaboratively, guided by the tutor, and helped-out when necessary.

Hint

There are many additional tips on working with small groups, and on teaching methods suitable for a range of settings, under the Learning and Teaching in Higher Education virtual learning environment, ELE, which can be found at http://vle.exeter.ac.uk. Sign up with your usual username and password. Select ‘University Resources’ from the Course Categories in the left hand block: this will take you to the homepage of the LTHE programme.

If you want to sign up for the Learning and Teaching and HE programme, you can find further information at: www.exeter.ac.uk

Take advice from colleagues and your mentor or line manager, or from your College Education Adviser, when deciding which sessions would be most useful for your teaching role.

8. Did I engage the students by asking them questions during the lecture?
9. Did I succeed in getting the students to ask me questions?
10. How well did I answer the students’ questions?
11. Did I return to the intended learning outcomes, and find out how the students felt they had got on with them?
12. Did I bring the session to a rounded and punctual close?
13. What was the best thing about this particular lecture?
14. What was the least satisfactory thing about this particular lecture?
15. What is the single most important change I intend to make next time I give this particular lecture?

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17. How well did I answer the students’ questions?
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Students may fall out with each other. Conflict can arise in small-group contexts, particularly when student contributions to the products of the work of a group are assessed, and when contributions have been uneven.

How we can spoil small-group work

The things which go wrong are not all down to students. The following short list shows that our own actions can lead to small-group work being unproductive:

1. Tutors sometimes carry on teaching, rather than keep students working actively. Particularly if the students don’t engage actively, or ask questions, it’s all too easy just to keep the small-group session going by expanding on what we may have covered in lectures.

2. Tutors sometimes make students feel uncomfortable. For example, when students turn up but have not done the expected preparation for a small-group session, it is natural enough to exhort them to greater efforts in future. However, if they respond badly to such pressure, they become more likely simply to skip a future session if they haven’t prepared for it.

3. Tutors sometimes allow dominators, and fail to bring in shy voilets. Find ways of equalising contributions in small groups, such as using post-its to get everyone to contribute ideas before opening up for discussion. Keep group sizes fairly small to avoid vocal speakers monopolising the session.

4. Tutors sometimes fail to make it clear what each small group session is intended to achieve. It is useful to continue the practice used for lectures regarding specifying the aim of the small-group session and some precise intended learning outcomes.

5. Some groups can become ‘disadvantaged’. For example, if a particular group gets into detailed discussion of what the assessment standards are, or what would be a reasonable exam question to expect, other groups which did not have this discussion are disadvantaged. Ideally, it is best to try any discussion about standards in the whole-group session.

Five ways to help students to learn well in small-group contexts

1. Help students to want more strongly to learn. Our best chance to achieve this is through our own enthusiasm for the subject – and making it obvious that we have students’ best interests at heart and want them to succeed. Where appropriate, use your own research passions or professional experience to stimulate active, intellectual engagement.

2. Help students to take ownership of their need to learn. We can do this by reminding students of what’s in it for them to succeed, and helping them to see exactly what they need to do to succeed. This boils down to making it very clear what sort of evidence of achievement they need to be working towards.

3. Make sure students understand that learning happens by doing. Help them to see that very little happens just sitting looking at some notes or handout materials, but that learning starts when they try to do something with the materials. When learning from books, handouts, or on-screen, a useful maxim is ‘not much learning will happen unless you’ve got a pen in your hand and are using it’. In other words, tutors can help students not to ‘drift’, but to make notes, jot down questions, and practice answering questions, while working with learning resource materials.

4. Make sure that students get quick and useful feedback. Help them to assess their own achievements, and to reflect on things they have done successfully, and think quite deliberately at what worked in their learning, and why it worked. Even more important, we can help students to learn from their mistakes – just as researchers and professionals do. If we can help them to see that getting things wrong at first is a very productive step along the way of getting them right, they can gradually become able to look at learning by trial-and-error as a valid and productive way of going about their learning.

5. Help students to make sense of things. Point out the benefits of collaborative learning here. Help students to find out how much they get their own heads round something they have just learned by explaining it to some fellow students who haven’t yet seen the light, and talking through it till they too have made sense of it.

It can be important not to allow students to worry too much about ‘not understanding’ or ‘not wanting’ – especially when difficult concepts or ideas are involved. Sometimes, the understanding will take its own time to dawn. Some things have to be lived with and worked with for a while before understanding begins to dawn. Indeed, sometimes there’s actually no need to understand something fully – all one may be required to do is to see it or apply it, and this may often be done perfectly successfully even without fully understanding it at that level of the curriculum.
Deciding on sub-group size

In small-group teaching, it’s often useful to divide the students into sub-groups, where the sub-group size depends upon what you intend your students to be doing. Some factors you may take into account are listed below:

Pairs: these aren’t really groups, in a sense, but the advantages include the fact that it’s not easy for one member to be completely inactive. A disadvantage is that there will often end up being a ‘reject group’ based on those students who didn’t get quickly into a group membership.

Threes: this group size is small enough to avoid most of the risks of ‘shy violets’, and big enough to bring together more experience than a pair. A disadvantage is that it’s not easy for one member to be completely inactive.

Fours: still small enough to ensure that everyone is encouraged to contribute – many group-work facilitators find fours a preferred group size. Disadvantages can include a tendency for the group to split itself into two pairs, and there isn’t a ‘casting vote’ if the pairs disagree on what to do next or how to approach a task.

Fives: here there is the ‘casting vote’ opportunity. The group is now getting just about large enough for the odd ‘passenger’ or ‘bystander’ to get away without contributing much to the work of the group.

Sixes and more: the main danger becomes passenger behaviours or non-participation.

Nine ways to help your students to get the most out of small-group sessions

1. Help your students to become ready for assessment
   This is the sharp end of tutoring, not least because most forms of assessment involve winners and losers – and it is very uncomfortable to be a loser. Perhaps the most important attribute of excellent tutors is the ability to be felt by students to be ‘on their side’ in the assessment battle. Even when tutors are going to be doing the assessment themselves, it is really helpful for students to feel that everything possible is being done by their tutors to maximise their chances of succeeding at the assessment hurdle.

Preparing for assessment should not degenerate into the ‘guess what’s in the tutor’s mind’ game – there should be no guesswork involved, students should have a clear idea of what’s in their tutors’ minds. In particular, it helps when tutors strive to help students to make sense of what they have learned, so that they feel they have ‘digested’ the information involved, and turned it into their own knowledge, and have a sense of ownership of their achievement well before the time when they are required to demonstrate evidence of their achievement of the learning outcomes.

2. Negotiate agreements with your small-group students
   The main advantage of learning agreements is that they help students to take ownership of the need to learn, and that because it is an agreement they feel they have played a part
in working out the time scales involved, and deciding what to learn, and how best to go about learning it, and at what level the learning needs to take place. The best ways of making it feel like an agreement to students is to ensure that they see that their tutors have their own parts to play in bringing the agreement to fruition.

3. Help students to make sense of their targets
In particular, clarify exactly what is meant by the intended learning outcomes. The problem with such outcomes is that they are often written in a foreign language to students – ‘academese’! It is all very well to use phrases such as ‘demonstrates your understanding of...’ but students need to know exactly how they are expected in due course to do this. They need to know what the evidence will look like when they have ‘understood’ something to the level required. They need to know exactly what is meant by the intended learning outcomes mean in practice.

4. Help students to see the importance of becoming better at learning
Study skills are important, not just in the context of helping students to succeed in their present formal study, and the better they become able to take on new learning targets, and work systematically and purposefully towards achieving these targets, the better the quality of their future lives. Even when an element of learning is proved unsuccessful, there are usually useful study skills lessons to be gained from the experience. Tutors can use small-group learning contexts to help by setting up practice opportunities, responding to the trial and error, and helping students to learn productively from each other’s experience.

5. Help students to manage their time
Time-management is not only an essential study skill, it is a life skill. Probably the most important single element of time-management is ‘getting started’ on tasks – if something isn’t started it will never get finished. Therefore, tutors in small-group contexts can help students to get their learning underway by pointing out that human nature is to find ‘work avoidance tactics’ which delay getting started, but that once recognised as such it is perfectly possible to counteract them. A task that has only been started for five minutes is much more likely to become completed than a task which has not yet been started. Therefore, tutors can help by making sure that tasks get started in face-to-face contact time, even if only for those vital minutes which will allow students to go away and continue them in their own time and at their own speed.

6. Help students to balance their act
An important addition to good time-management is good task-management. In other words, help students to prioritise their tasks. This involves making sure that the important ones get done, and the less-important ones aren’t given too much time. Tutors can help students in working out what exactly are the most important tasks, and putting these at the top of the agenda. Tutors can also help by advising on sensible limits for the important tasks, so that they don’t just swallow up all of students’ available time and energy, and leave other important tasks not started. It can be better to do an hour’s worth on each of three tasks than to spend all three hours on one task, especially if all three tasks contribute to the assessment agenda.

7. Help students to identify questions, and seek the answers to them
If I knew what the exam questions were going to be, I could easily prepare for the exam,’ many students say. But they can’t know what the questions are going to be. Any important piece of information can simply be regarded as the answer to a question. It is really useful to help students to think in terms of questions rather than information. Once they know what a question is, they can find out the answer in any of the following ways:

- Look it up in a book or handout;
- Look it up on the internet;
- Ask an expert witness – for example you.
- Ask other students and see if they know the answer;
- Ask other people altogether;
- Encourage students to make question banks of their own.
In other words, get them to jot down all the questions which they might someday need to be able to answer, to demonstrate their learning. It is really useful to start with the intended learning outcomes, and turn these into long lists of very short, sharp questions, so that students get the message that if they can answer lots of straightforward questions, they can in fact answer much more complex questions, as these just amount to a collection of the shorter questions.

It can be particularly useful to get students to make question banks in small groups, so that the range of questions is better, and to help them to learn from each other’s questions. Tutors can give valuable responses to questions which are the really important ones, to help to steer students to the main agendas of their learning.

8. Help students to become better readers
Not all students come from households where walls are lined with bookshelves. Not all students devour books. Indeed, for many students, reading is not a particularly pleasurable activity, unless they are reading about something about which they are already passionate.

Not all of these are necessarily equally important, but all of them are useful to help students to understand the contexts in which this evidence will be generated – whether it is exams, coursework, practical work, or any other area of learning that students need to work on in their future lives. Even when an element of learning has proved unsuccessful, there are usually useful study skills lessons to be gained from the experience. Tutors can use small-group learning contexts to help by setting up practice opportunities, responding to the trial and error, and helping students to learn productively from each other’s experience.

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Not all students come from households where walls are lined with bookshelves. Not all students devour books. Indeed, for many students, reading is not a particularly pleasurable activity, unless they are reading about something about which they are already passionate.
Tutors can help students to realise that they don’t have to devour books, but that all that can be achieved is to use them successfully to find information from them. In other words, information retrieval (whether from books or websites) does not necessarily mean reading everything in sight, but homing in to what’s important. This goes back to starting reading with questions in mind. If students read a page of text pre-armed with five questions, they are much more likely to get what is intended out of the page than if they just ‘read’ it.

Help students to make good use of headings, sub-headings, contents pages, and the indexes of books and articles. Help them to read in ‘search and retrieve’ mode, so they are looking for particular things, and noting them down as they find them, rather than simply reading page after page vainly hoping that some of the information there will ‘stick’.

A good start is for tutors to reinforce that revision is simply about systematically becoming better able to answer questions – that’s what exams and tests actually measure. As with anything else, the best way to become better at something is to do it – and do it again – until it becomes second nature. Students who have practised answering a question seven times in a fortnight are very likely indeed to get it right the eighth time – in the test.

Another way tutors can help students regarding revision is alerting them to what not to revise. There’s no point spending time and energy on learning something that won’t or can’t be the basis of a sensible exam or test question. Similarly, anything that isn’t directly related to an intended learning outcome is not on the revision agenda. It’s very important, it would have been there among those intended outcomes. We do, of course, all want our students to read widely and extend their understanding beyond the areas covered in class whenever possible. But when assessments approach, tutors can remind students that what is measured by tests and exams isn’t what’s in their heads – it’s usually what comes out of their pens or pencils. In other words, it’s their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes that is the basis for the assessment, and the best revision processes involve purposeful practice at evidencing that achievement.

Help students get their revision act together

Some students regard revision for tests or exams as a bore. This is all too often because they have previously tackled the job in boring ways. They have tried to ‘learn’ their subject, only finding them, rather than simply reading page after page vainly hoping that some of the information there will ‘stick’. Another way tutors can help students regarding revision is alerting them to what not to revise. There’s no point spending time and energy on learning something that won’t or can’t be the basis of a sensible exam or test question. Similarly, anything that isn’t directly related to an intended learning outcome is not on the revision agenda. It’s very important, it would have been there among those intended outcomes.

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5. For seminar-type sessions, did I manage to let students themselves play a full part in delivering their contributions?
6. Did I succeed in getting the students to work together in different combinations, so that they made the most collaborative working?
7. Did I manage not to intervene too readily if the session ‘got stuck’ temporarily?
8. How well was I able to use the small-group session to address questions and problems raised by individual students?
9. Did I bring the session to a rounded and punctual close?
10. What was the best thing about this particular small group session?
11. What was the least satisfactory thing about this particular small group session?
12. What is the single most-important thing I will do differently next time I run a similar session?

Problems in small-group teaching: "What can I do when...?"

What can I do when students don’t turn up for my small-group sessions? In practice, there’s little mileage in trying to force students to turn up to any element in their programmes, and when students don’t regard small-group teaching as particularly important, the problem of absenteeism increases. However, a combination of one or more of the following tactics can improve things sometimes:

- **Make sure it’s worth turning up.** When the students who are present come away with something they would not have wanted to miss (be it handouts, the light dawning, tasks they found valuable doing, and so on), the word can get around and attendance can improve.
- **Ask some regular absentees ‘what’s wrong?’**. Sometimes there could be a timetable clash you didn’t know about, or travel difficulties relating to a particular time slot. Sometimes, of course, the answer can be ‘I didn’t find the sessions helpful’ and we may need to probe gently into ‘why not exactly?’ and remain ready to listen to the responses.
- **Keep the assessment agenda on the table.** When students can see that each small-group session has a bearing on helping them become ready for future exam questions, or helps them see what’s being looked for in coursework assignments, students are less likely to miss.
- **Include at least some coursework mark for ‘participation’.** Don’t just include it for attendance however, or the odd student may come along but not join in.

What can I do when students refuse to do a task?

This is an awkward one. If all the students won’t start your task, it’s worse. The following tactics can help...

- **Make sure the task briefing is really clear.** Explain again exactly what you want them to do. It can be useful to say ‘what it really means is...’ and then put it into straightforward language.
- **Show the task on a slide, or give it out as a handout.** Sometimes, students can get the gist of a task rather better if they can see it and hear it at the same time.
- **Break the task into smaller bits.** Ask students to just do the first bit now, and then explain the later stages one by one when they’re properly under way.
- **Ask them to work in pairs to start with.** You can then go round any pairs which still seem reluctant to start the task, and find out more about what could be stopping them.

- **Set a precise deadline for the first part of the task.** Sometimes this is enough to get them started.
- **Resist the temptation to keep talking.** Give them some time when there’s really nothing more going on, and it’s clear that you expect them to get stuck into the task. A few seconds of solemn silence may seem interminable to you, but the resistance to getting started with the task may be fading away.

What can I do when students don’t get on with each other?

This is more likely to happen in small groups than large groups. The following tactics can help:

- **Re-arrange group membership now and then.** This can be done randomly, but checking that particular pairs of students who didn’t seem to be getting on are then moved apart into different groups.
- **Give them all a task to start on their own.** Sometimes if all of the students have already invested some energy in thinking through the topic before the actual group work begins, differences between students are pushed further into the background.
- **Make the first part an individual written task.** For example, give out post-its, and ask everyone to jot down a single idea relevant to the task. Then when everyone is armed with at...
least one idea, the chances of students not getting on with each can be reduced.

- Go closer to the people who don’t seem to be getting on. Sometimes, your proximity will cause them to bury any differences – for the moment at least. You may also then get the chance to work out what exactly has been causing the confrontation between the students concerned.

- Watch out for the occasional ‘difficult student’. When the same person doesn’t get on in group-work contexts with different individuals, it can be worth having a quiet word. Just sometimes, you’ll find the odd student who really doesn’t function well in group contexts.

What can I do when a student dominates the group?

This is a frequent occurrence. Sometimes the causes are innocent enough – enthusiasm, knowing a lot about the topic, and so on. One or more of the following tactics may help you to balance things out:

- Set appropriate ground rules at the start of small-group work. It can be useful to say a little about leadership and followership – making the point that in many small-group situations in real life, too many leaders can mitigate against success, and that everyone needs to be able to be a good follower for at least some of the time.

- Re-arrange group membership regularly. This means that the domineering student moves on, and doesn’t dominate other students for too long.

- Intervene gently. For example after the domineering student comes to a pause, ask, “would someone else now like to add to this please?”

- Have a quiet word. Do this with the domineering student outside the group context, for example giving suggestions about ‘air time’ and allowing everyone’s views to be heard.

- Change the dynamic. Appoint the domineering student as chairperson for a particular activity, with the brief not to make any input on that task, but to coordinate everyone else’s thinking.

- Don’t fight it too hard. Recognise that domineering is a common human trait, and that domineering people often reach distinguished positions in the world around us, and may be developing relevant skills in small-group contexts.

Assessment, marking and feedback to students

Why are assessment and feedback so important?

Nothing we do affects students more. If we get our assessment wrong, students’ whole lives or careers could be jeopardised. Recognising this, the University has recently developed a key Assessment and Feedback Strategy, available at www.exeter.ac.uk and each College has written its own, complementary strategy. All Colleges recognise that feedback is vital to students, so that they can be praised for what they do well, learn from their mistakes, and improve their next piece of work on the basis of our feedback. For many, marking students’ work and giving students feedback on their progress is a real ‘in at the deep end’ experience. Sometimes it seems as if we’re expected simply to hold a red pen in our hand and automatically to know how to use it.

Summative and formative assessment

‘Summative’ assessment is normally measured at the end of an element of learning – for example end-of-module exams. University policy is that feedback should be given for all assessments. Please check your College’s policy on the feedback process, and the type of feedback they require. ‘Formative’ assessment is normally used during the course of a module, and even though the marks or grades may count towards students’ overall awards, the feedback they receive is intended to help them to identify weaknesses, and build on strengths, to make their next piece of assessed work better. With large classes, the time taken to give students effective formative feedback increases, and the danger is that the quality of the feedback is reduced by the pressure on assessors.

Assessment matters to students

Students are often quite strategic about their learning – if it counts towards their overall qualifications they will do it, if it doesn’t, many won’t. This, in fact, is an intelligent response to the situation students often find themselves in – a heavy burden of coursework assessment and looming exams.

Yet assessment and feedback are areas where students are least satisfied with their experiences of higher education, as shown by the data from the annual National Student Survey in the UK. It is probably the case that students who are highly successful in assessment are perfectly satisfied with the feedback they get, and that student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback is attributable to students who fare less well, and perhaps rightly believe they could have done better if they had been given enough formative feedback early enough to improve their performance.
The sharp end of learning and teaching

Because assessment is so important to students, emotions can run high. Students can be very sensitive to the language we use when we give them feedback. It is all too easy for us, despite our best intentions, to damage their motivation in our attempts to give them constructive feedback on weaknesses in their work. This danger is exacerbated if we have large piles of work to mark, and not enough time to phrase our feedback carefully.

Assessment is at the sharp end for us too, as we are likely to be under the scrutiny of external examiners.

Fit-for-purpose assessment is valid, reliable, transparent and authentic – and manageable!

Why do we need these characteristics for assessment and what do they mean in practice?

Validity is about making sure that we’re using assessment to measure exactly what we set out to – students’ evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes. We need to be able to be sure that we know exactly which intended outcomes we are concerned. When setting take home tasks, the task should be concerned; these reduce the effect of variation in the standard of assessment on the journey from the first piece of work you mark down to the last piece in the pile.

Reliability is about making sure that we’re being fair and consistent, and that each mark or grade is accurate and realistic. In practice, this means that we’ve got to develop a well-honed set of marking criteria so that we can be sure that we’re being equally fair to all of our students. We also need to make sure that different assessors agree on the marks to be awarded consistently, and that each mark or grade is accurate and realistic. In practice, this means that we’ve got to develop a well-honed set of marking criteria so that we can be sure that we’re being equally fair to all of our students. We also need to make sure that different assessors agree on the marks to be awarded fairly to all of our students. When there are really good marking criteria, different assessors will agree on the marks to be awarded for particular exam answers or assessments. Also, there won’t be any variation in the standard of assessment on the journey from the transparency means we have to make sure that our students know how assessment works. They need to know what we’re looking for in an excellent answer. They need to know what they must do to reach a pass mark. They need to know what would not get them a pass. In other words, we need to help our students to see that what is being assessed is their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and that these outcomes are useful to them as goalposts for their studying. They need to know what they must do to reach a pass mark. They need to know what would not get them a pass. In other words, we need to help our students to see that what is being assessed is their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and that these outcomes are useful to them as goalposts for their studying. They need to know what they must do to reach a pass mark. They need to know what would not get them a pass. In other words, we need to help our students to see that what is being assessed is their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and that these outcomes are useful to them as goalposts for their studying. They need to know what they must do to reach a pass mark. They need to know what would not get them a pass. In other words, we need to help our students to see that what is being assessed is their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and that these outcomes are useful to them as goalposts for their studying. They need to know what they must do to reach a pass mark. They need to know what would not get them a pass. In other words, we need to help our students to see that what is being assessed is their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and that these outcomes are useful to them as goalposts for their studying. They need to know what they must do to reach a pass mark. They need to know what would not get them a pass. In other words, we need to help our students to see that what is being assessed is their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and that these outcomes are useful to them as goalposts for their studying. They need to know what they must do to reach a pass mark. They need to know what would not get them a pass. In other words, we need to help our students to see that what is being assessed is their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and that these outcomes are useful to them as goalposts for their studying.

Authenticity has two sides. We need to be able to be sure that what we are marking is indeed the work of the students concerned. When setting take home tasks, the task should be difficult to do by someone not engaged in the subject. Every assessment task each time the subject is run. Plagiarism may overlap with the problem of authenticity. We need to design out plagiarism in coursework assessment, by making it assess more clearly students’ individual efforts (for example critical incident accounts, reflective logs, and so on). The other side of authenticity is about how ‘real life’ our assessment is in practice.

For example, we can’t expect to measure drama performance skills effectively by asking students to sit in an exam room and write about drama performance skills.

Manageability also has two sides – assessment needs to be manageable for us and for our students. We need to be streamlining assessment so that it is of high quality and we’re assessing (making judgements on important things) and not just marking to tick off routine things, for example spelling, punctuation and grammar. When students themselves are overloaded with assessment, they are often driven to surface-learning mode, learning things rapidly just for the exam or assignment, then forgetting them just as quickly.

Beyond exams, essays and reports

There are many alternatives, including:

• Computer-marked multiple-choice tests or exams: once set up, the computer handles all the marking, and can even cause feedback to be printed out for candidates as they leave the test venue, or indeed give them instant on-screen feedback if the main purpose is feedback rather than testing. Care has to be taken, however, when designing multiple-choice questions for testing purposes, and the questions are known to discriminate reliably between students at different ability levels in the subject concerned;

• Short-answer exams or tests: these reduce the effect of students’ speed of writing, and can cover a greater breadth of syllabus in a given assessment element than when long answers are required;

• Annotated bibliographies: for example where students are asked to select (say) the most relevant five sources on a particular idea or topic, then review them critically, comparing and contrasting them in say 300 words. This can cause students to think more deeply about the topic than they may have done if writing a 3,000-word essay (and the annotated bibliographies are much faster to mark);

• Portfolios of evidence: these can take even longer to assess than essays or reports, but can test far more than merely essay-writing or report-writing skills;

• Oral presentations: these focus on important skills that would not be addressed or assessed through written assessment formats;

In-tray exams: much more ‘real life’ testing situations, where instead of a question paper on the exam-room desk there is a collection of paperwork, which students study and use to answer relatively short, sharp decision-making questions which are issued every now and then during the exam;

• Open-book (or ‘open-notes’) exams: students don’t have to rely on memory, and have with them the texts or notes of their choice (or a known-in-advance selection of texts and handouts), and where the exam questions test what they can do with the information already on their desks;
1. Don't do it on your own. Make sure you get feedback on each of your questions from colleagues. They can spot whether your intended or preferred approach is made clear to students.

2. Get one or two colleagues to do your questions – or do it yourself. Being alert in advance to the ways that different students might approach a question gives you the opportunity to accommodate alternative approaches in your marking criteria, or to adjust the wording of your question so the emphasis on memory.

3. Have your intended learning outcomes in front of you as you draft your questions. It is all too easy to dream up interesting questions which turn out to be tangential to the learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is possible to write too many questions addressing particular learning outcomes, leaving other outcomes unrepresented in the exam.

4. Keep your sentences short. You're less likely to write something that can be interpreted in more than one way if you write plain English in short sentences.

5. Don't measure the same things again and again. For example, it is all too easy in essay-type exam questions to repeatedly measure students' skills at writing good introductions, firm conclusions, and well-structured arguments.

6. Include data or information in questions to reduce the emphasis on memory. In some subjects, case-study or multiple-choice questions can be a useful first step towards identifying the mark-bearing ingredients of a good answer. It also helps you see when what you thought was going to be a 30-minute question turns out to take an hour. If you have difficulties answering the questions, the chances are that your students will too.

7. Include data or information in questions to reduce the emphasis on memory.

8. Decide what the assessment criteria will be. Check that these criteria relate clearly to the published intended learning outcomes. Make it your business to ensure that students themselves are clear about these objectives or intended outcomes, and emphasise the links between these and assessment.

9. Work out tight marking criteria for yourself. Imagine that you are going to delegate the marking to a new colleague. Write it all down. You will find such criteria an invaluable aid to sharing with students, as well as colleagues actually co-marking with you, helping them to see how assessment works.


Designing marking criteria

The University has a generic set of marking criteria, upon which Colleges base more specific criteria for different levels and different types of assessment. When marking, ensure that you're using the appropriate assessment criteria – take advice from a mentor or line manager.

Aim to make it so that anyone can mark given answers, and agree on the scores within a mark or two. It is best to involve colleagues in your piloting of first-draft marking criteria. They will soon help you to identify areas where the marking criteria may need clarifying or tightening up.

Pilot your marking criteria by showing it to others. It's worth even showing marking criteria to people who are not closely associated with your subject area. If they can't see exactly what you're looking for, it may be that the criteria are

* Vivas (oral exams) – which can be a better measure of students’ understanding, as their reactions to on-the-spot questions are gauged and there is no doubt about the authenticity of their answers (such doubts can colour the assessment of various kinds of written work).

* Poster displays where students’ individual or collaborative design and originality can be among the attributes measured.

Setting exam questions

The suggestions below are extracted from Race et al (2005)* and may help to spare you from some of the headaches which can result from hastily written exam questions.

1. Have your intended learning outcomes in front of you as you draft your questions. It is all too easy to dream up interesting questions which turn out to be tangential to the learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is possible to write too many questions addressing particular learning outcomes, leaving other outcomes unrepresented in the exam.

2. Keep your sentences short. You are less likely to write something that can be interpreted in more than one way if you write plain English in short sentences.

3. Work out what you're really testing. Each question measuring decision-making, strategic planning, problem solving, data processing (and so on), or is it too much dependent on memory? Most exam questions measure a number of things at the same time. Be up-front about all the things each question is likely to measure.

4. Include data or information in questions to reduce the emphasis on memory.

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If you have to design marking criteria, this should be done carefully. As your marking criteria will normally be shown to people including external examiners and quality reviewers, it's important to design criteria in the first place so that they will stand up to such scrutiny. The following suggestions should help:

1. Write a model answer for each question, if the subject matter permits. This can be a useful first step towards identifying the mark-bearing ingredients of a good answer. It also helps you see when what you thought was going to be a 30-minute question turns out to take an hour. If you have difficulties answering the questions, the chances are that your students will too.

2. Make each decision as straightforward as possible. Try to allocate each mark so that it is associated with something that is either present or absent, or right or wrong, in students’ answers.

3. Aim to make it so that anyone can mark given answers, and agree on the scores within a mark or two. It is best to involve colleagues in your piloting of first-draft marking criteria. They will soon help you to identify areas where the marking criteria may need clarifying or tightening up.

4. Allow for ‘consequential’ marks. For example, when a candidate makes an early mistake, but then proceeds correctly thereafter (especially in problems and calculations), allow for some marks to be given for the ensuing correct steps even when the final answer is quite wrong.

5. Pilot your marking criteria by showing it to others. It’s worth even showing marking criteria to people who are not closely associated with your subject area. If they can’t see exactly what you’re looking for, it may be that the criteria are

Practical tips for marking students’ work

1. Look at the ways in which others in your College have marked and fed back on similar assessments, using the same marking criteria.

2. Ascertain what kind of feedback is expected and expected turn-around time when the deadline for marking is. For longer assignments, apply a ‘best fit’ principle: which grade band does this assignment fit best into? If you’re marking shorter questions you may prefer to mark a whole script at a time, or just Question 1 of every script first. Do what you feel comfortable with, and see what works best for you.

3. Put the assignments in rank order so that you can easily amend your work later if you need to. Mark against the criteria.

4. When you give feedback, then give specific guidance about what the student could do next time to raise their grade. Then finish with a positive comment. This helps prevent students from feeling negative about their (lack of) achievement.

5. Lear from your own mistakes. If it’s your first time setting marking criteria, looking at other people’s ways of doing them will help you to focus your efforts. Choose to look at marking criteria from other subjects that your students may be studying, to help you tune in to the assessment culture of the overall course.

6. Watch out for prejudices. Make sure that each time there is a ‘benefit of the doubt’ decision to be made, it is not influenced by such factors.

7. Look at what others have done in the past. If it’s your first time setting marking criteria, looking at other people’s ways of doing them will help you to focus your efforts. Choose to look at marking criteria from other subjects that your students may be studying, to help you tune in to the assessment culture of the overall course.

8. Avoid halo effects. If you’ve just marked a brilliant answer, it can be easy to go into the same student’s next answer seeing only the good points and passing over the weaknesses. Conversely, when you look at the next student’s answer, you may be over-critical if you just marked a brilliant one.

9. Mark against the criteria. For longer assignments, apply a ‘best fit’ principle: which grade band does this assignment fit best into? If you’re marking shorter questions you may prefer to mark a whole script at a time, or just Question 1 of every script first. Do what you feel comfortable with, and see what works best for you.

10. Put the assignments in rank order when you have finished your provisional marking. Compare assignments with similar marks and adjust where you see the need.

11. Use the full range of marks. If you have work which is very good and excellent, that should be reflected in your marks.

12. Take account of whether assignments will be second marked, second blind marked, or moderated. Make sure students know that any mark you give is provisional and subject to the usual procedures of second marking and external examining. Don’t make written comments on the scripts themselves, to avoid prejudicing the judgement of a second marker (unless of course photocopies have already been made of each script for double marking).

Making the most of feedback to students

It used to be the case that there were two main ways of giving students feedback on their work:

• Written (handwritten) comments on students’ work;

• Face-to-face feedback, where tutors discussed students’ work with them, individually or in small group tutorials.

Although these two methods are still in use, in many disciplines there are too many students needing too much feedback for either process to be practical any longer. Fortunately, word-processing technology and communications technologies have extended our repertoire of methods of giving students written feedback. We can now choose from options including:

• Statement banks, from which we can draw often-needed feedback explanations from a collection of frequently used comments which apply to the work of many students, and stitch these comments together to make a composite feedback message to individual students.

• Emailing feedback directly to students so that they can study our feedback in the comfort of privacy at their computers.

• Building an overall general collection of feedback comments to the class as a whole, based on common errors and frequent difficulties, posting this on an electronic discussion board which each student can view, and then emailing...
individual students only with any specific additional feedback they need.

• Using assignment return sheets, where the feedback agenda has already been prepared (for example based on the intended learning outcomes or the assessment criteria for the assignment), enabling us to map our feedback comments to students more systematically.

• Creating an overall feedback report on a task set to a large group of students, covering the most important mistakes and misunderstandings, referring individual students to the sections relevant to their own work, and adding minimal individual feedback to students, addressing aspects of their work not embraced by the general report.

• Model answers: these can show students a lot of detail which can be self-explanatory to them, allowing them to compare feedback comments with their own work and see what they’ve missed out or got wrong.

• Giving feedback in a lecture, allowing us to cover all the most important points we need to make, and also allowing students to see how their own work compares with that of their fellow-students.

• Using the ‘track changes’ facilities in word-processing packages to edit students’ electronically submitted essays and reports, so they can see in colour the changes we’ve made to their work at the click of a mouse on their own screens.

This sounds complex, but in practice can be a very quick way of giving detailed feedback, and the feedback is in exactly the right place amid their words, not in a margin or over the page.

Feedback to students should be:

1. Timely – the sooner the better. There has been plenty of research into how long after the learning event it takes for the effects of feedback to be significantly eroded. Ideally feedback should be received within a day or two, and even better almost straightaway, as is possible (for example) in some computer-aided learning situations, and equally in some face-to-face contexts. When marked work is returned to students weeks (or even months) after submission, feedback is often totally ignored because it bears little relevance to students’ current needs then.

The University of Exeter has a policy of returning work within four term weeks, enabling students to derive greater benefits from feedback. When feedback is received very quickly, it is much more effective, as students can still remember exactly what they were thinking as they addressed each task.

2. Personal and individual. Feedback ideally needs to fit each student’s individual achievement. Global ways of compiling and delivering feedback can reduce the extent of ownership which students take over the feedback they receive, even when the quality and amount of feedback is increased. Each student is a different person.

3. Articulate. Students should not have to struggle to make sense of our feedback. Whether our messages are congratulatory or critical, it should be easy for students to work out exactly what we are trying to tell them.

4. Empowering. If feedback is intended to strengthen and consolidate learning, we need to make sure it doesn’t dampen learning down. This is easier to ensure when feedback is positive, of course, but we need to look carefully at how best we can make critical feedback equally empowering to students.

5. Manageable. There are two sides to this. From our point of view, designing and delivering feedback to students could easily consume all the time and energy we have – it is an endless task. But also from students’ point of view, getting too much feedback can result in them not being able to sort out the important feedback from the routine feedback, reducing their opportunity to benefit from the feedback they need most.

The following suggestions are adapted from Race et al (2005)* and aim to give you some practical ways in which you can increase the learning payoff caused by your feedback to students.

1. Provide students with a list of feedback comments given to a similar assignment prior to them submitting their own. You can then ask students, for example in a large group session, to attempt to work out what kind of marks an essay with specific comments might be awarded. This helps them to see the links between feedback comments and levels of achievement, and can encourage them to be more receptive to critical comments on their own future work.

2. Let students have feedback comments on their assignments prior to them receiving the actual mark. Encourage them to use the feedback comments to estimate what kind of mark they will receive. This could be then used as the basis of an individual or group dialogue on how marks or grades are worked out.

3. Focus your comments on students’ work, not on their personalities. Comments need therefore to be about ‘your work’, rather than ‘you’. This is particularly important when feedback is critical.

Maximising learning payoff through feedback

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3. Focus your comments on students’ work, not on their personalities. Comments need therefore to be about ‘your work’, rather than ‘you’. This is particularly important when feedback is critical.

Maximising learning payoff through feedback

4. Get students to look back positively after receiving your feedback. For example, ask them to revisit their work and identify what were their most successful parts of the assignment, on the basis of having now read your feedback. Sometimes students are so busy reading, and feeling depressed by the negative comments that they fail to see that there are positive aspects too.

5. Ask students to respond selectively to your feedback on their assignments. This could for example include asking them to complete sentences such as: ‘The part of the feedback that puzzled me most was…’; ‘The comment that rang most true for me was…’; ‘I don’t get what you mean when you say…’; ‘I would welcome some advice on…’.

6. Ask students to send you an email after they have received your feedback, focusing on their feelings. In particular, this might help you to understand what emotional impact your feedback is having on individual students. It can be useful to give them a menu of words and phrases to underline or ring, for example including: exhilarated, very pleased, miserable, shocked, surprised, encouraged, disappointed, helped, daunted, relieved (and so on).

7. Ask students to tell you what they would like you to stop doing, start doing, and continue doing in relation to the feedback you give them. This is likely to help you to understand which parts of your feedback are helpful to specific students, as well as giving them ownership of the aspects of feedback that they would like you to include next time.

8. Don’t miss out on noticing the difference. Comment positively where you can see that students have incorporated action resulting from your advice given on their previous assignment. This will encourage them to see the learning and assessment processes as continuous.

Tips for ensuring inclusive, accessible teaching

Diversity in language and culture
Tips for clarity of communication
• Give clear instructions and explain the rationale behind what you want students to do.
• Check that you are not speaking too quickly – are students keeping up with note-taking? Enunciate carefully, aiming for clear pronunciation, and use the microphone in lecture theatres.
• Check students’ understanding of key concepts and subject-specific vocabulary.
• Check your language for clichés, idioms, UK-specific references – if you use them, make sure you explain them.
• When lecturing, use clear signposting and repeat key points.
• Provide visual support that aids understanding.
• Make space for questions and don’t rush off after a session.

Importance of group dynamics
• Use icebreaking activities which encourage students to find out more about the different cultures represented in the group.
• Provide opportunities for students to bring their own national experience into discussions.
• Mix up groups within seminars – make sure students speak to different people each time.
• Encourage discussion by building confidence – let students discuss in small groups or pairs first, or ask students to prepare before the seminar.
• Cultivate a positive attitude to being in a diverse group – remind students of the benefits, such as opportunities to learn more about other cultures, and preparation for the real world.
• Make the most of departmental social activities.

Developing an analytical approach
• Be clear in your own mind what it means to be ‘analytical’ in your field, and be explicit to students about what it means to be ‘analytical’. Give examples.
• Create opportunities for students to develop an analytical approach – for example, use guiding questions with a text, or specific questions to prepare for a seminar.
Understanding different values and attitudes
Be prepared for a variety of attitudes to:
• what constitutes plagiarism
• being able to ask for help
• speaking out in a group
• what constitutes a valid argument.

Support within the University of Exeter...
Student Skills (Education Enhancement): for free skills guidance and tailor-made workshops see www.exeter.ac.uk

INTO: free classes for students whose first language is not English are available at the INTO Centre.

Further support for international staff: Teaching in UK universities www.internationalstaff.ac.uk

Support for students with disabilities
It’s important, when planning your teaching, to aim to make it as accessible as possible by all, including students with disabilities.

The following advice is provided by JISC TechDis Service, a UK-wide educational advisory service for accessibility and inclusion www.techdis.ac.uk

• Face forward at all times when speaking. Lip readers need to see the lips move to hear the words.
• Ensure that all content on a slide or overhead is vocalised to the audience. It may be that in a large room the slide may not be readable from the back or that a visually impaired participant cannot access the material.
• Use a microphone if available. It may be connected to an induction loop for Hard of Hearing participants. Even in a small room, your voice may not carry as much as you think it does.
• When preparing visual aids, remember that dark blue text can be easier to read than black, and a sans serif font (e.g. Arial) more legible than a serif font (e.g. Times New Roman).

For much more advice on creating high quality, accessible teaching resources go to the JISC TechDis guidance at www.techdis.ac.uk/accessibilityessentials

The Accessibility Centre (University of Exeter) offers advice and support for staff in supporting students with disabilities www.exeter.ac.uk

Further links and resources for you to explore
Higher Education Academy (HEA) www.heacademy.ac.uk
The Academy’s mission is to support the higher education sector in providing the best possible learning experience for all students.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) www.hefce.ac.uk Working in partnership, HEFCE promotes and funds high-quality, cost-effective teaching and research, meeting the diverse needs of students, the economy and society.

Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) www.jisc.ac.uk JISC’s mission is to provide world-class leadership in the innovative use of ICT to support education and research.

Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) www.seda.ac.uk The professional association for staff and educational developers in the UK, promoting innovation and good practice in higher education.
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IST/HEaTED is now the recognised professional association and advocate for Higher Education Technical Specialists, raising their profile and getting the profession recognised as an equal and valued community of practice within the UK higher education sector.

For further information, please visit: www.istonline.org.uk/heated/heated.htm