Key Ideas for Effective Teaching

1. Be specific about what you are teaching

- The central focus for students in undertaking a course is the assessment. In fact, assessment is sometimes called the 'de facto curriculum' because whatever the stated curriculum, student engagement is largely determined by the assessment where there is a direct return for effort. The way to focus student engagement and shape specific learning is through carefully designed assessment.

- Effective teaching involves identifying the intended outcomes of teaching at the level of program, course, topic, lecture or tutorial.

- Within higher education the convention is to develop learning outcomes statements which identify what students are expected to know or do as a result of teaching

- Learning outcomes should incorporate a number of aspects including subject content, learning processes, the University of Adelaide Graduate Attributes, academic skills, technical skills, Threshold Learning Outcomes (where they exist), subject benchmarking statements, requirements of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), and the relevant perspectives of stakeholders such as professional associations, employers and accrediting/registering bodies.

- Only include learning outcomes if they are assessed; assessment must be directly linked to specific learning outcomes. Alignment of learning outcomes and assessment is critical to the validity of a curriculum. A brief guide on how to write Learning Outcomes is available on the University's website.

2. Understand who you are teaching

- Effective teaching has a dual focus: it is as concerned with who is being taught as much as with what is being taught.

- Knowing the characteristics of the student group and the implications of those characteristics for teaching enables you to put in place appropriate teaching and learning arrangements. This is particularly the case with greater diversity in the student population including large cohorts of International Students, increasing participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds and special consideration of groups such as elite athletes and highly mobile workers.

- Significant characteristics include: life experience (school leavers, mature age, International students, in the work force); competing demands (part time/fulltime students, work, family, cultural/religious obligations); prior knowledge and skills (previous study in the field, comfort with technology, levels of proficiency in language and learning); sociocultural issues (socioeconomic status, gender, age, cultural and religious backgrounds); disability (mobility, access to assistive technologies, dyslexia); learning styles (visual, logical, physical, verbal, aural, social, solitary); and location including peripatetic responsibilities (access to resources, support).

- Since these characteristics or combinations of them (rather than solely intellectual capacity) are often the determinants of academic success, a fair and equitable approach will make appropriate provisions for the student cohort without compromising the need to meet the stated learning outcomes.

- Some provisions have a basis in legislation such as reasonable accommodations in assessment and access to assistive technologies that apply to disability; others provide flexibility for disadvantaged groups, learning styles or lifestyle needs through a range of strategies including: multiple formats and modes of delivery (lectures, readings, online lectures, PowerPoint slides, online study materials); access to facilities (adaptive software and hardware); consideration for social and cultural obligations (timetabling alternatives, flexibility in the timing of assessment, leave arrangements); and access to supplementary resources that address gaps in knowledge and skills.

3. Make clear links to the broader course/program context

- Effective teaching clearly locates a course or topic within a broader discipline and program context. The specific contribution a course or topic makes to the program outcomes should be evident in learning outcomes, teaching and learning arrangements and assessment.

- A major/program of study should progressively expose students to the increasing complexity of the subject matter by explicitly teaching both content and the relevant academic and research skills within the component courses. Learning how to present ideas in formats acceptable to a particular academic discipline is a central aspect of becoming competent within that discipline.

- In addition to the subject content and related academic skills, the course or topic should be contributing to the major/program outcomes for generic skills such as writing, group work, communication skills, problem solving and leadership as expressed in the University's Graduate Attributes.

- The progressive development of a broad range of major/program outcomes through explicitly teaching them within courses creates program cohesion and ensures students from all backgrounds are supported to achieve outcomes at the course, major and program levels.

4. Identify the best ways to teach this particular content

- Effective teaching uses multiple ways of engaging with students including: large, small, and individual face-to-face interactions in on campus contexts such as classrooms, laboratories, studios and consultation; field-based experiences including excursions, work experience, internships and field work; static resource-based information including study guides, learning packages, exemplars, workbooks, films, recorded lectures and websites; interactive technology assisted practices including interactive online packages, blogs, wikis, email, texting, Facebook, discussion boards, online quizzes and virtual classroom scenarios.

- Selecting the most appropriate combination from the various possibilities is determined by a number of issues including the discipline, specific learning outcomes, location of students, physical and technological infrastructure, student access to technology, expertise of staff and characteristics of students. The lecturer may be involved directly in the delivery of content or indirectly by facilitating access to content from other sources.

- In the vast majority of courses at the University of Adelaide the primary form of teaching is on campus using face-to-face methods with MyUni resources and technology assisted learning experiences playing a supplementary role. The term Blended Learning is used to refer to teaching where face-to-face learning is strategically combined with mediated forms of delivery to provide particular learning outcomes.

- In courses, or topics within courses, where the primary form of teaching is online the teaching and learning arrangements are conceptualised quite differently, even when delivery includes some face-to-face components.

- The University has signalled its intent to continue to offer courses primarily as a face-to-face on campus experience although the expectation is that there will be a shift toward online delivery of content and greater emphasis on interactive face-to-face activity. Increasingly content is freely available in a range of forms and the real value of face-to-face teaching is its potential for high level cognitive processes of application, analysis, synthesis and critique. Sometimes this is known as the Flipped Classroom.

- Where the same course is delivered in different modes they should have the same learning outcomes and equivalent assessment.

5. Plan the teaching sessions in detail including the resources and support you will need

- Effective teaching in any mode requires detailed planning and preparation which focusses beyond the delivery of content to stimulating students to engage critically with the content.

- Whatever form of delivery you use, the various components of teaching should include relevant academic skills, research skills and Graduate Attributes, and relate directly to both the stated learning outcomes and the assessment.

- For face-to-face teaching identify learning outcomes for each session and plan both the content (what you are teaching) and the process (how you will teach it) to achieve these outcomes. This includes specifying students' pre-reading and other preparation, identifying academic articles to be processed through the Digital Resources Management Centre, creating in-class activities, quizzes, developing PowerPoint slides and course readers, identifying and accessing required audio visual equipment, recording lectures and loading resources on MyUni.

- For online courses or topics, develop materials by dividing the content into weekly topics of 10-12 hours total student work and, following the same structure for each week, provide the content (usually through other sources) and learning processes which often involve activities, exercises, quizzes, communication technologies and reflective practices. Carefully designed courses will reduce the need for students to contact you for clarification.

- Identify relevant complementary resources for students such as background information, assumed knowledge, study skills, academic writing skills, generic skills and information technology skills. The University Library has a number of useful generic and subject specific guides and web resources.

6. Communicate clearly to students

- Effective teaching involves establishing and maintaining a professional relationship with students and this is largely dependent on good communication. Explicit and consistent communication will not only provide a better learning experience for all students it has the potential to reduce your workload by decreasing misunderstandings and requests for clarification.

- Academic staff interact with students in very different ways and so it is important to establish from the outset how you will be operating. Use a variety of means to communicate depending on the purpose and the workload implications. Give an indication of how students can contact you, your availability for appointments, and turn-around time on emails and phone messages. Course related questions can often be dealt with more efficiently through online discussion.

- The Course Outline requires you to provide information about the course including: topics, assessment and teaching and learning arrangements. You may want to provide additional details on course-related materials and other activities through MyUni. Ensure all this information is consistent. If students are to take responsibility for their learning they need to understand the rationale for their learning experiences and where their effort will have the most impact.

- Provide students with information about how teaching and learning arrangements will support them in developing specific skills and Graduate Attributes, and how this is linked to the assessment.

- Consider feedback to students on their assignments as individualised tuition, an expert perspective on their work which provides them with valuable insight into their academic progress and stimulates further learning.

7. Determine how effective the teaching has been and make improvements

- Effective teaching includes evaluation of teaching performance. This is an ongoing process which typically involves both formative and summative evaluation processes.

- All academics have a professional responsibility to monitor their own performance by scrutinising student learning. In addition, universities have formal evaluation processes which are linked to their quality assurance processes.

- Evaluation has two main functions. The first is to make judgments about quality for purposes which include accountability and the provision of evidence for processes such as tenure and promotion. The second function is concerned with analysing data and information for the purpose of improving the quality of courses, including the student learning experience.

- Summative evaluation occurs at the end of a course and is typically part of the quality assurance system of the University. Typically these include both quantitative and qualitative data and cover a range of issues. Processes and methods may include peer review, questionnaires, interviews, data analysis and document analysis. In addition, Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) surveys are undertaken regularly to gain student perspectives and often used as evidence when applying for appointment, tenure and promotion. An important outcome of summative evaluation is the improvement of courses for subsequent cohorts of students.

- Formative evaluation is focused on improving a course while it is being taught. It is a characteristic of good teaching, with the lecturer intentionally monitoring the impact teaching is having on learning. Formative evaluation methods and processes include 'incidental' observations (such as the nature of questions asked by students, student energy levels), planned brief activities (targeted questioning, quizzes or tasks), peer review (a colleague provides constructive feedback), and analysis of students' performance (high fail rates or large numbers of students making similar mistakes in early assessments). Data gathered for the purposes of formative evaluation are not used in summative evaluation.

Further reading

Phil Race has written a very practical resource for those new to teaching in universities. Download a copy of In at the deep end - starting to teach in higher education.

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