



# IN AT THE DEEP END

STARTING TO TEACH IN  
MUNSTER TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

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## Foreword

Throughout this guide, we are grateful to Phil Race for the insights and resources he has shared that help us, the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) and AnSEO – The Student Engagement Office, support you as you develop your professional teaching, learning, assessment and student engagement (TLASE) practices here at MTU.

Over the last number of years, the TLU has engaged with experts, practitioners, and researchers in TLASE activity to develop a series of MTU resources – many of which are based on your peers’ expertise of TLASE projects they have led. We have also engaged with the national and international community to bring leading speakers and workshop facilitators into physical and virtual learning spaces to help us all develop our practice. These resources and learnings are captured throughout the [TLU](#) and [AnSEO](#) websites and can help to relate some of Phil’s expertise and advice within a local MTU context so we encourage you to explore, discover and enjoy!

Our resources and activities are shaped by your experiences, so please let us know if there are aspects you believe would fit well in this guide or elsewhere on our website to support your professional development across teaching, learning, assessment and student engagement.

### *Marese, on behalf of the TLU & AnSEO Teams*



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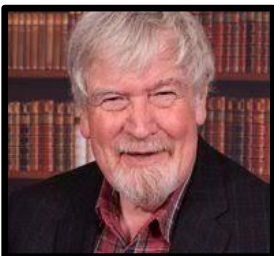
## Why use this guide?

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 sometimes even days of taking up their posts, there are lectures to be given, assessments to be created, tutorials to run, seminars to lead, marking of students’ work to be done, and so on. Sometimes they face one or more of these prospects without having had any opportunities to learn how to tackle such challenges.

Relevant staff development opportunities may indeed exist, but not always in time for those critical first experiences of teaching or assessing. You may have extensive experience of the subjects you’re about to teach, and perhaps years of experience in industry in a relevant field – but you might still now feel you are going ‘in at the deep end’ concerning teaching, learning, and assessment.

There are countless books, articles, chapters, and papers in the literature about teaching, learning, assessment, and feedback in higher education – but for many people especially in the first weeks of teaching, they have neither the time nor the energy available to consult all or even some of these materials. I’ve contributed several resources myself to this literature, notably ‘Making Learning Happen: 3rd edition’ (London: Sage, 2014) and ‘The Lecturer’s Toolkit: 5th edition’ (London: Routledge, 2019), and the present resource is my attempt to cherry-pick and update some of the suggestions I’ve provided in such books, and fine-tune them to the needs of those starting out now in teaching in higher education.

My aim, therefore, in this resource is to help you to cope well with those first few critical elements of your work in teaching in higher education. I hope, however, that this resource will then continue to be helpful to you as a practical guide to some of the main things to keep in mind as you venture forth into your teaching career. I hope also that the tips, ideas and tactics in this resource may be useful to those already well-used to teaching in higher education and add some further insights and approaches to their repertoire. Alongside these, you may also wish to consult the Teaching and Learning in CIT (TACIT) Guides.




*Prof Phil Race*

## How this guide is structured


This guide is structured into the following four main sections:

- A. PREPARING TO DIVE IN!
- B. LECTURES: LARGE-GROUP TEACHING AND LEARNING
- C. TUTORIALS AND SEMINARS: SMALL-GROUP TEACHING AND LEARNING
- D. ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK: TWO CENTRAL DRIVERS FOR SUCCESSFUL LEARNING

In addition, you will find the following key symbols used throughout the guide to highlight additional useful information:



These boxes will provide **further reading** to the information shared in the guide. Where possible we've linked the suggested readings to the [MTU Library catalogue](#) for easy access.



These boxes **hints and tips** from Phil Race which include PowerPoint tips as well as hints on increasing student engagement in different teaching and learning settings

## Intended learning outcomes

When you've used the ideas and suggestions in this resource, it's likely you will be better able to:

1. Feel more confident and relaxed about starting to teach in MTU.
2. Prepare for and give your first lectures effectively and successfully.
3. Prepare for and conduct, successfully, your first classes, workshops, tutorials, and seminars.
4. Undertake your first elements of marking systematically, fairly and efficiently.
5. Give useful feedback to your students, to help them learn successfully.
6. Continue to develop your teaching and assessment practices systematically and professionally.

## A: PREPARING TO DIVE IN!

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

Staff tend to be appointed based on their expertise and experience in the subject matter of their particular disciplines, rather than their teaching skills. However, even staff new to teaching in higher education have already had at least some experience of working with students, for example alongside researching or studying for higher degrees themselves. That said, when teaching first becomes a significant part of one’s career, it can seem rather daunting a prospect, for example, to step up onto the podium in a large lecture theatre, or to design some web-based learning for a group of students, or to take home a big pile of students’ work to mark.

Many of the people around you may seem to have been teaching for ever, and glide swimmingly (it appears) through the processes of preparing lectures, planning tutorials and seminars, designing and using online resources and assessing students’ work. **But all of these colleagues are likely to remember that knowing one’s stuff was only a relatively small part of becoming able to help students learn one’s stuff!**

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

### Who can help me?

Often, you’ll find someone who will be a real help. You may be set up with a mentor – an experienced colleague to guide you through those first teaching experiences or you may be taking over a course or a class from someone else who’s still around to show you how it has been done in the past. But sometimes, you may find yourselves stepping into the shoes of someone who’s moved on to a different institution or even retired. It can be scary to take on an established course or module when there’s no-one around to answer your questions of ‘what can I do when...?’.

You may already have had the opportunity to avail of relevant staff development or training. Through this, you may know people to ask when you have worries or problems. That said, even when such training is available, you are quite likely to have to get started in your teaching before the training covers what you need. In any case, you may feel that you want to show that you can sort things out on your own, and you may not want to share your concerns or worries with colleagues or mentors. If that’s the case, I hope this resource will help in its own way, not least the sections which address frequently asked ‘what can I do when...?’ questions.

Before getting into the main part of this resource, it could be useful for you to fill out the following checklist to help you establish where you are now, and what your immediate priorities will be. Don’t worry if filling this in makes you feel that there are too many challenges – the rest of this resource aims to help you with all of them. The first column is for ‘not applicable’ – in other words for all those challenges which aren’t yours – not yet at least. (Looking back at your filled-out checklist may later surprise and delight you at how far and fast you’ve moved in those first few weeks of teaching). Success and leadership are often linked with an ability to ask.

***“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes determining the proper questions to ask”***

**ALBERT EINSTEIN**

Here we provide you with a set of useful starting point questions and encourage you to think about and create your own.

## Where am I now?

QUESTION	NOT APPLICABLE TO ME	NOT YET	YES	DATE NEEDED	NOTES FOR ACTIONS
<b>LECTURES</b>					
Have you got lectures to prepare?					
Have you made a list of lecture theatres and classrooms you'll be using?					
Have you the chance to visit these venues, and see what is needed to teach effectively in each of them?					
Have you already presented in a lecture theatre or large classroom, and got used to the presentation equipment commonly used?					
Do you know roughly how many lectures, with how many students and when?					
Will you have one or more lectures with the same group of students?					
Do you know where to find the intended learning outcomes for these lectures?					
Have you given lectures before on this topic?					
Have you got your own materials on this topic?					
Have you other materials (e.g., links to digital resources) which you can make available to students?					
Have you got any presentation slides or notes on this topic? (including those given to you by others)					
Do you already feel competent to create presentation slides yourself?					
Will you be involved in setting exam questions in connection with your lectures?					
Have you thought about how you will share your lecture materials with students – online, paper-based and so on?					

QUESTION	NOT APPLICABLE TO ME	NOT YET	YES	DATE NEEDED	NOTES FOR ACTIONS
<b>SMALL GROUP TEACHING</b>					
Have you got tutorials, classes, workshops, laboratories, problem-solving classes or other small group teaching sessions to prepare?					
Do you know roughly how many of these you will have and with how many students?					
Do you know where these fit into the overall module or course?					
Are you giving the associated lectures yourself? If not, do you know who is?					
Do you know what the small group sessions are intended to cover? Do you already know the subject matter?					
Do you know roughly how big the groups will be for these?					
<b>MARKING, ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK</b>					
Will you have marking to do?					
Have you already had experience of marking students 'work and giving them feedback?					
Approximately how many students 'work will you have to mark?					
Will you be giving the related lectures, or just some of them, or will other colleagues be giving the lectures?					
Do you know who will be giving you guidance and instruction on how to do this to fit in with MTU assessment systems/Marks and Standards?					

**YOUR OWN TOP THREE FURTHER QUESTIONS, OR OTHER SPECIFIC CONCERNS AT THIS POINT:**

1.

2.

3.



**Want to read more about starting to teach in higher education?**

See [Race, P. \(2019\) The Lecturer's Toolkit, 5th edition: Abingdon: Routledge](#), and Ramsden, P. (2003) Learning to teach in higher education, Abingdon: Routledge.



## B: LECTURES: LARGE-GROUP TEACHING AND LEARNING



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### Getting started with Lectures

For many staff in higher education, lectures or large classes are a central part of their teaching. They're also the 'public' part – seen by students and often by others. 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 experience. Actually, giving conference presentations can be even more scary, as the audience is likely to know a lot more about the subject than is typical of students in a lecture.

However, most people find the prospect of giving their first lecture quite daunting. The thought of an hour under the spotlight seems like a long time! In practice, even though many institutions timetable 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 it is necessary to have the venue ready for the next class in reasonable time by the end of the allotted session. It's worth planning to be finished 5 or so minutes before the session is due to end, to give your class time to leave, and the next class time to take their seats in time for the start of their session. (That said, there is a tendency for teaching to be structured in larger-slots in some areas – and a two-hour or even three-hour session may be in your sights – but don't panic – the last thing one should do in such circumstances is stand and talk for all that time!).

### How may students 'capture' your lecture?

In former times, students were expected to make detailed notes of things you said or wrote on boards or showed them on-screen. Nowadays, this is much less likely to be how students treat your lectures. In many institutions, lectures are recorded using screen casting<sup>1</sup> software, so the students can see them again at will – but in practice they don't do this as often as one might hope.

Students may well use their mobile phones to take photos of your screen now and then as a way of capturing key points – this is worth bearing in mind when you design slides or images you plan to show, to ensure that what students capture will indeed be useful to them. Some students may even record audio or video bits of your lectures on their phones – and there's no feasible way of stopping this without resorting to draconian measures. It could be best to explain to students that they may only use recordings they make for their personal study, and it would be regarded as unacceptable to share them on social media.

It can still be useful to encourage a small amount of student writing to occur during lectures. For example, now and then, you could give them a couple of minutes to make a summary of the key points you've been talking about – they may well do this on their laptops or phones rather than on paper. It can then be useful to ask them to compare

<sup>1</sup> For more information on screen casting to support teaching and learning, please email the Department of Technology Enhanced Learning at [edtech@mtu.ie](mailto:edtech@mtu.ie)

their summaries with students sitting close to them and add to their own any interesting or important points that they may have missed.

### Don't just 'lecture'

Depending when you yourself last studied in a formal context, your idea of 'a lecture' may be quite some distance from what students expect nowadays. Not only has the associated technology developed considerably, but student expectations have changed significantly. A notional 1-hour lecture doesn't boil down to 60-minutes' worth of formally presented 'content'. Remember in each class the intended outcomes need to be introduced and then debriefed, and your class needs to settle in, and leave. So, we're normally thinking about no more than say 50 minutes for the 'delivery' part of your large group session. But in practice, 50 minutes is too long for you to 'deliver' and too long for your students to 'receive'. Concentration spans are much shorter than 50 minutes. In fact, 'delivery' alone doesn't usually work very well at all, and **for student learning, the best lectures are much more interactive.**



## INFORMATION OVERLOAD

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It is better to break your lecture down into some shorter elements, for example no more than ten minutes at a time of you talking to your students, interspersed with getting them to do things, for example making decisions, discussing particular ideas with their neighbours, asking you questions, answering questions you ask them, and so on. 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' (ILOs)

It is good practice to explain to your students what they should be getting out of the large group session. Often, the design of a programme/course or module will already be expressed in terms of such outcomes, and for a lecture you will normally need to focus on just a few of these. However, the learning outcomes as written into course documentation 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 experience you have designed for them. There are all sorts of active verbs and phrases which help to clarify what 'understand' may have meant in the published versions, including 'explain', 'discuss', 'argue that', 'compare and contrast', 'prove that', 'describe the origins of', and so on.

In practice, it is better to present the intended learning outcomes for a particular lecture a few minutes into the event, so that all of your students have got there and settled in. It can be useful to spend the very first few minutes recapping what you have covered in previous lectures while latecomers arrive, and until the class is settled. If, of course, you're about to give the very first lecture in a series, you need to do something different, for example, gently quiz your students to find out how much they may already know of what you're about to start teaching them. You could, for example, issue the class with two Post-its, one pink and one yellow, and ask everyone to jot down the

most important thing they already know about the topic on the yellow one, and one question they would like answered about the topic on the pink one. Collect these and take them away, and before the next lecture, you have a much better picture of where the class is at in the context of the topic. You could also do something similar using a dedicated Twitter hashtag or via a space on the course/programme area of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

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

The intended learning outcomes can also be revisited during your last minute or two of the session. Near the scheduled end of the lecture, it is useful to return to your slide of the intended outcomes.



**PowerPoint User Tip:** If you're using slides, you could make your very last slide repeat the intended learning outcomes. You can get instantly to that last slide simply by entering '99' (or any number greater than or equal to that of the number of that last slide) at the keyboard and pressing 'enter'. This means that even if you haven't managed to get through all of the slides in your presentation, you can seamlessly go to that rounding-up slide. You can then ask your students about how well they now feel that they have achieved the outcomes, possibly asking them to show for each outcome in turn whether they feel they have 'completely achieved' or 'partly achieved' or 'not yet achieved' it by show of hands raised – two, one, and none respectively. This not only reminds the students of what they should now be able to do, but also lets you know how well your lecture worked.

### What about handouts?

You may well remember being issued with handout materials at most lectures, and organising and filing these, and using them as key revision aids later. Handout materials have virtually disappeared now due to practicalities including financial constraints and the fact that students rarely consult them after the event! That doesn't mean that the content of such materials isn't given out anymore – but now resource materials are normally made available to students electronically – online on course websites, discussion boards and so on. They're often nowadays posted online in advance of live sessions, both to support students with visual impairments or dyslexia and with the hope (or expectation) that students will use them before each lecture and revisit them later, and perhaps download them and annotate them with their own notes and questions.

The relevant links to such resource materials may well be included in slides used at lectures, so that the materials themselves can be located simply by clicking a link on the slides when students download the slides.



**HINT:** Even when lots of articles, books and resources are linked to lectures, there's no guarantee that students will use them as we intend. It's therefore useful to accompany such resources with suggested activities for students to do before – or during – or after using them. For example, a few short questions to answer, or something asking students to identify the three main ideas in a resource, or to propose a weakness in a particular document.

## Designing slides for lectures

Most lecturers use slides to show text, images, links to websites, quizzes, and many other illustrations or activities. In many subjects, slides can be quite sophisticated, containing diagrams, photos, graphs and charts, drawings, and other sorts of visual information. In some subjects, slides tend to be mostly plain text 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 all the slides are just text in a very similar format, and most lecturers now deliberately include visual stimulus on at least some of their slides.



Want to read more about using more images in your presentations?

- See [Roberts, D., 2017. The engagement agenda, multimedia learning and the use of images in higher education lecturing: or, how to end death by PowerPoint. \*Journal of Further and Higher Education\*, pp.1-17.](#)
- Or go for his thought-provoking book Roberts D. (2018) “The Ultimate Guide to Visual Lectures”

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 around 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 lecturers. 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 session, 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 our students. Slides can be released before the lecture, if necessary, with the caveat that not all slides may be used. Then after the lecture, once you know what slides you actually used, release the finalised set of slides to students.

If you’re confident already regarding using technology in lecture contexts, you can also slip in video-clips, visits to websites and online live searches by putting appropriate links into slides. It’s worth remembering however that these may not work if connection to the internet is interrupted, or if there are compatibility issues between the computer and the sources you wish to use. Also, it’s important to make sure that all important information is going to be easily visible to all students in the lecture – print too small to read is infuriating to them.



**POWERPOINT USER TIP:** Prepare paper copies of all of your slides, say six per page, and lay these out in front of you if possible at the start of your lecture with the numbers of the slides clearly visible 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 and when, without having to clumsily run backwards or forwards through slides you’re not actually going to use on that occasion. Remember, however, to tick off on your paper copy which slides you did in fact use (or not use) so that later you still have a record of exactly what you covered in that particular lecture.

## Some tips for good slides

1. **DON'T PUT TOO MUCH ON ANY SLIDE.** A few questions, headlines or bullet points are much better than solid paragraphs. Detailed information is best left to materials posted on the web or intranet for students to access.
2. **USE LARGE FONTS.** It's really useful 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 ACTUALLY 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 (for example if there are windows without good blinds). It's also important to get expert advice on choices of colours suitable for anyone with visual problems or dyslexia.
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 – you can tell if they need to move their heads as you reveal a 'last bullet point'.
5. **USE IMAGES OFTEN.** Use video-clips, pictures, cartoons, and graphs, when they help to bring your subject to life. Do, however, use copyright cleared images or make sure you're not breaching copyright laws when using other people's images – there are online collections of copyright-cleared illustrations you can use without fear of this.
6. **DON'T INCLUDE DETAILED GRAPHS, TABLES OR FLOWCHARTS.** It is highly likely that the detail would not be clearly visible at the back of the room. Such detail is better made available in downloadable materials.
7. **DON'T INCLUDE 'SLIDE NUMBERS' ON SLIDES.** The software allows automatic numbering if that's what you want, but not including slide numbers gives you the freedom to pick-and-mix your slides, without your students realising that you're skipping some of them! It also allows you to post to the course or module webpage after the lecture the slides you actually used and miss out those you might have skipped.
8. **CONSIDER CAREFULLY WHETHER TO PUBLISH YOUR SLIDES IN ADVANCE.** When some students may already have seen your slides, it robs you of opportunities to 'surprise' them with unexpected quotations, or even 'fun' slides. Especially if you're going to pick-and-mix from your slides as in the 'hint' above, only issue later the slides you did actually use. However, you may want to selectively release slides in advance to students with special requirements.
9. **DON'T CAUSE 'DEATH BY BULLET POINT' – OR ANIMATION DIZZINESS!** It gets tedious for students if successive bullet points always come one at a time in exactly the same predictable way.
10. **LEARN FROM OTHER PEOPLE'S USE OF SLIDES.** Whenever possible sit in on colleagues' lectures, and conference presentations and see what works well for others – and what doesn't.



**POWERPOINT USER TIP:** Remember to switch the display right off now and then – and know how to get it back easily. There are few things worse than a slide staying up on screen too long after it has been used – for example when you've moved on to talk about something else 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 in Anglophone countries 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. (Alternatively, 'W' for a white screen, and 'W' for getting your slide 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 (not least, you – you find out more about the students' needs, preferences and aspirations each time you give a lecture). 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 video-clips and websites you visited. Those who did attend should emerge with much more than just the information on the slides.

Questions and answers work both ways. During your lecture, you've 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 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 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...

Don't just ask "any questions?" now and then. 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 and getting ready to leave.

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, many 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 many 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. Besides, when a student asks a good question after the lecture, you're likely to think 'I wish I'd clarified this to the whole group – not just you!'

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

- Repeat the student's 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;
- 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:** A useful way of getting questions from a large group of students is to pass some post-its around. Ask all the students to jot down any questions they have, one per post-it, and either to pass them down to you, or to stick them on a wall or door on their way out of the lecture. You could also ask them to post slips of paper with questions as they leave into a collection box you've made from a photocopier paper box, or you could ask them to post questions on Canvas or via Twitter. You can then gauge which questions are the most prevalent ones, and answer them in your next lecture, and note also what the other questions tell you about how the overall learning is progressing in the group.

## Getting students to answer *your* questions

In large group sessions 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, or more may have cultural or personal constraints about speaking out in public or just lack the confidence to speak in a large group.

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

- Don’t ask the whole class a question, then simply answer it yourself, unless you are using it as a rhetorical device. That just causes the class not to take your questions seriously, and not to even try to think of answers.
- Don’t pick on the same students each time you ask a question – for example the ones who happen to have made 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.
- Don’t choose a student then ask your question – that causes everyone else to not even try to think of an answer to your question.

## Question, Pause, Pick!

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

1. Ask the question;
2. Wait for enough time for many students to be ready to give at least some level of answer ideally asking them to jot something down while they are thinking;
3. Pick – pick a student who you have seen writing assiduously or who is looking at you with a smile.

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 the question 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. It also means that when they may later revisit the slides for the lecture, they’re reminded of the questions. When a student has answered a question, it can work well to give that student the power to pick who’s going to answer the next question. It can be wise to make sure that you praise students for good answers – make them feel good about having had a go, even when you may wish to elaborate on their answer.

## 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. Always make it clear it is OK to pass if they don’t want to answer. 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

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 (or for your project, or for your next coursework)” you’ll notice students’ attention and interest increases!
2. **MAKE SURE YOU’RE BOTH SEEN AND HEARD.** If available, always use voice amplification systems when available, as students with aural impairments may be relying on using hearing loops and other students are likely to benefit too from your increased audibility. But avoid if possible being tied to a podium: use a radio mic if at all possible. Don’t just say ‘can you hear me at the back?’ – ask someone in the back row a question

and find out! And don't dim the lights too low to show your slides at the expense of students no longer being able to see you or their notes!

3. **DON'T RELY TOO MUCH ON THE TECHNOLOGY!** Power cuts happen. Projectors and computers can fail. Connections can break down. Access to the internet can be interrupted. When such things happen, it's really useful to have something else you can do with the session without the technology – or until it's restored. Some discussion tasks for clusters of students can be one way of keeping them busy, rather than watching you struggle with the technology.
4. **DON'T KEEP SLIDES UP TOO LONG.** Students will keep looking at the screen, even when that screenful is quite finished with. Get them to look at you now and then. Gesture, body-language, tone of voice and facial expression can all help to bring a topic to life.
5. **AVOID DEATH BY BULLET POINT.** Make different slides look different – include some charts or pictures, where possible. If you're confident with technology, put in some optional short video clips now and then – but nothing which would matter if it didn't work straightaway.
6. **REMEMBER KINDNESS IS IMPORTANT.** Smile. Be human. Look at them. Some of them might feel nervous or anxious, far from their previous learning context or a long way from home. Respond to them. If they can relate to you as a person, and not just feel like an anonymous number in a mass of students, they're more likely to come to your next lecture too.
7. **DEVELOP A POSITIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT.** A positive classroom climate feels safe, respectful, welcoming, and supportive of student learning. Developing relationships by sharing stories and experiences with the students is important. Encourage students to participate, ensure they feel safe, encourage risk-taking, encourage genuine and authentic conversation where students can make mistakes and learn from each other, foster trust and respect in a supportive way.
8. **GIVE STUDENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU AND WITH EACH OTHER.** Part of our problem in the first few weeks of term is getting students to attend classes, if they develop good relationships and bond with classmates this can greatly increase the chances of them attending. Providing opportunities for students to turn to and talk with each other in class gives them a chance to build relationships and 'test the water' so to speak in a safe manner. Putting up simple icebreakers like 'Turn to the person on your left and ask them, where they are living and how they travelled to college this morning' can be a safe way to open conversation.
9. **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. Get them making decisions, guessing causes of phenomena, trying out applying ideas, solving problems and so on. They'll learn more from what they do than from what you tell them.
10. **DON'T PUT TOO MUCH CONTENT 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.
11. **BRING IN SOME APPROPRIATE HUMOUR.** The odd funny slide, or amusing anecdote, or play on words can work wonders at restoring students' concentration level. Students love stories! 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 and be really careful it might be interpreted as sexist, racist or in other ways inappropriate, especially if you have international students for whom the humour might not translate easily!
12. **KEEP YOURSELF TUNED INTO THEIR '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.
13. **MAKE THE LEARNING RELEVANT AND ACCESSIBLE.** This continues on from the 'WIIFM' idea. Find out what the students know already; Find out what the students want to learn or what they think they will learn in this course; Ask them how they have learned in the past, what teaching approach do they find useful. All of this will set the scene for you and the students, it is good to manage the students' expectations also at the onset so that they and you have a clear and collective view of what the module will entail.
14. **TEACH SOMETHING NEW IN THE FIRST CLASS.** We often start our lectures teaching the basics and this is understandable as we argue that students may not understand more difficult concepts and we are probably

right! However, the point in the first lecture is to keep the students' attention and hence teaching them something new that they might not fully understand yet is important, it gives them the appetite to work and learn more as they get a glimpse of how what they are learning can be applied.

15. **BE INTERACTIVE.** Early-career lecturers can often feel they have to keep talking for the full allocated period, but it's much better to break up the time available into manageable chunks, with a clear idea of what you expect students to be doing in any particular chunk. They might be just listening, making personal notes, reflecting individually for 30 seconds, asking or answering questions, talking to a partner, undertaking a quick quiz, applying theory to practice, checking understanding, working on a problem, reproducing a list of pros and cons and so on.
16. **START AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON.** If you are going to incorporate active learning into your session, then do so in the first lecture. Rather than tell students what you are going to do, show students what you are going to do. Teach students what to expect from you and show them what they will miss if they miss your class – make it so they do not want to miss it!
17. **DON'T OVER-RUN.** At least some of your students are likely to have something else important to go to after your session, and perhaps with not much of a margin for error. If you come to a good stopping place and there are 15 minutes left, finish with your closing section and stop. Students actually like lectures which finish early now and then.
18. **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. Whet their appetites to come back.

### Problems in Large Group sessions: '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 before they actually start in post. In each case, I will suggest a few potential ways of getting around the problem – leaving you to take your pick of which would suit you best – or think of your own better solution.

#### 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.
- Don't imagine that everyone in the room will have their full attention on you for every second of the session! Student's minds are full of many things other than your performance. Any gaffes you make may only be noticed by a few of the students there and will soon be forgotten.
- Have good prompts available. It's reassuring to have (for example) a list or printout 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. Asking students to reflect on what you've been talking about for 30 seconds is refreshing for everyone.

#### 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 discuss with someone beside you 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 were, 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 and keep a pen handy to annotate them as you are going along.
- 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. 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 a student’s question?

A common nightmare – and a not-infrequent occurrence in practice! You’ll feel less concerned about this as you gain experience – but the following tactics can take away some of the 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 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. Quite often, there will be someone there who is willing to 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 answer to, say so. “Interesting, but not actually needed for this module” and so on.
- Don’t get flustered. Just say “That’s a great question that I don’t have time to /can’t answer right now. I will post a response on the module space on Canvas / get back to you next week etc”.
- Or you can invite the student who asked the question to jot it down on a post-it, with their email address, so that you know exactly what the question was, and can respond to the questioner directly as soon as you’ve located an answer. But don’t forget to share the answer with the whole group at the next lecture or on Canvas too.

### What can I do when students repeatedly come in late, and disrupt my lecture?

This can be annoying but requires a certain balancing act. There will usually be some students who arrive late, but sometimes the problem becomes more significant in certain timeslots and at particular periods in a module.

- Don’t gradually get more and more annoyed – and above all, try not to look annoyed! The next student to arrive may have a very good reason for being late.
- Resist the temptation to be sarcastic (e.g., “How good of you to join us today”). Mostly, students who come in late don’t actually enjoy being late, and if they get a rough ride from you, next time they’re late they may well decide not to risk coming in at all.
- If the late coming is noisy (loud doors, shoes on solid floors, and so on), pause until it will be possible for everyone to hear you properly again. The students themselves will get tired of having to wait for latecomers, and will often show their own disapproval, sparing you from the need to do so.
- If necessary, agree some ground rules with the whole group. For example, if quite a lot of the students have had to come from another session at the other end of the campus, negotiate to start promptly five minutes after the normal time.

- Should you encounter rude or disrespectful behaviour, don't challenge an offender in front of peers – it's better to chat quietly out of class – there could be something major going on in the student's life, and maybe the behaviour is a cry for help.
- Build in a little 'warm-up' time at the start of each lecture to enable you to have a 'soft start'. In other words, start doing something useful with the students (for example, reminding them of three important points from last week, or quizzing them gently), so that the really important things aren't missed by most late-comers.

### What can I do when the technology lets me down?

This happens to just about all of us! For example, your slides disappear, or freeze! The thing not to do is struggle for ages, with the undivided attention of the whole group, with a mouse, a remote control, a keyboard, or any other piece of technology. 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, even when you're not. Prepare for this by always having a flexible task ready for the students to do while you sort things out. For example, give your students a discussion task to do – something to talk about to those sitting next to them – a decision to reach, a problem to solve, and so on. It's a good idea always to have such a task ready and waiting. Then when they're all busy and eyes are off you, you can try to rescue the technology.
- Ask for help. "Anyone know how to fix this please?" quite often brings a competent volunteer from the floor. Sometimes, you can obtain 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 put the relevant slides onto the web. Your students won't mind you stopping early – it won't be the worst thing that's happened to them that week!

### What can I do when 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 and be ready for someone else's assignment deadline. Whatever the cause of absenteeism, one or more of the following tactics may help.

- Don't wait an inordinate time for more students to appear. Those who came punctually deserve to be getting some value, so get started even if the audience is sparse.
- Find ways outside the lecture room to ask a few students why they missed a particular session. Don't however nag them and tell them how unwise they are being – keep to fact-finding till you know more about what's going on.
- Link sessions clearly to the published module/programme outline or assessment agenda. Students don't like to miss out on (for example) clarification of what a typical exam question could reasonably ask of them, or some helpful hints on how best to tackle a coursework assignment.
- Don't vent your frustration on the students who do turn up. If anything, make them feel all the more welcome and valued.
- Try for added value. Make sure that the students who do turn up feel that it's been well worth turning up. Give them a useful and enjoyable learning experience.
- Recognise that it's not just you: globally lecturers are reporting that students' attendance is not what it was for all sorts of complex reasons, but do discuss it with colleagues to see if this is a phenomenon everyone is experiencing with this cohort.

### What can I do when students are talking in my lecture?

Many lecturers get upset by this, and clearly if students can't hear you over each other's chatter, the situation becomes untenable.

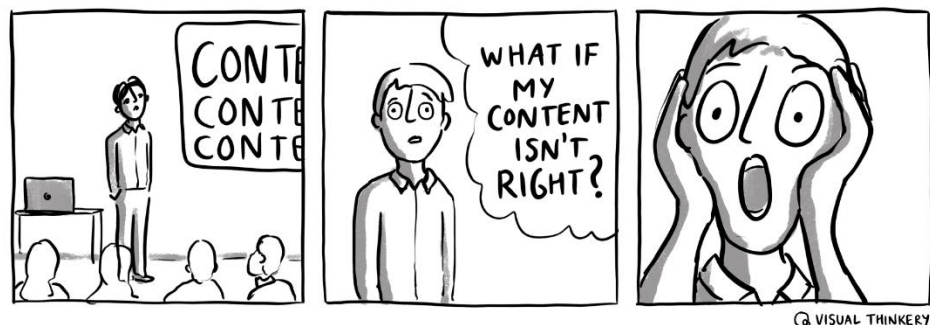
- Don't just carry on trying to ignore it. That often makes the problem get worse. Pause, looking at the people who are talking until they stop – or until the other students shut them up for you.
- Don't necessarily assume they're just being rude. Sometimes, one will have asked another to explain or repeat something that has been missed. Sometimes non-native speakers could be translating what you say into another language for each other.
- 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.
- You can often minimise such behaviours by moving around the room, going closer to the students who are talking without pretending that you've noticed their behaviour.
- 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 carry out.

### What can I do when I come to the end and there are still 15min 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 (or use Twitter) 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 would be expected in answer to that question.
- Ask the students to jot down the two most important things they now know 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.

### A LESSON IN ART HISTORY



## Checklists

### Checklist when preparing your lecture

QUESTION	Yes	Not Yet	Not applicable	Action Planning
Do I know how many large-group teaching sessions I will be giving to this class?				
Do I know how many small group teaching sessions I'll have and how these are sequenced and fit in around the large group teaching sessions?				
Do I know roughly how many students may be there and what their backgrounds are likely to be?				
Have I found out what these students are likely to know already about the topic of the lecture?				
Do I know where my particular session fits in to the overall programme/course or module my students are studying?				
Have I been to see the actual teaching room (or rooms regularly used by my Department) that I expect to be using to check out AV equipment, sight lines, and 'feel'?				
Have I got the published intended learning outcomes for the module and these sessions?				
Have I turned these into the actual intended learning outcomes I will introduce at the start of my lecture?				
Have I prepared slides to accompany my lecture?				
Have I checked out that I can work the equipment I need in this particular venue? Is all the equipment already there?				
Have I identified or prepared any related material I want students to be able to download relating to the lecture?				

QUESTION	Yes	Not Yet	Not applicable	Action Planning
Have I the opportunity to talk about my particular session to other colleagues who already work with these students?				
Have I tested that I can be seen and heard well in this lecture venue?				

#### Review checklist after giving a lecture

Question	Very well	Quite well	Not well	Action Planning
Did I introduce and explain the intended learning outcomes clearly to the students?				
Did I manage to speak confidently and clearly, or do I still need to work on this?				
Did I give the students some things to do as part of the lecture?				
Did I manage to involve most or all of the students in doing things during the lecture?				
Did my slides/other resources help the students to make sense of the subject?				
Did I remember to switch the screen display off, when it was not needed?				
Did I engage the students by asking them questions during the lecture?				
Did I succeed in getting the students to ask me questions?				
How well did I answer the students' questions?				
Did I return to the intended learning outcomes, and find out how the students felt they had got on with them?				
Did I bring the session to a rounded and punctual close?				

Question	Very well	Quite well	Not well	Action Planning
What was the best thing about this particular lecture that I can build on for the future?				
What was the least satisfactory thing about this particular lecture?				
What is the single most important change I intend to make next time I give this particular lecture?				



### Want to read more about effective lecturing?

See:

- Brown, S. and Race, P. (2002) *Lecturing: A Practical Guide*. London: Routledge
- Exley, K. and Dennick, R. (2009) *Giving a lecture: From presenting to teaching*, Abingdon: Routledge
- [Wilson, K. and Korn, J. H. \(2007\) Attention during lectures: Beyond ten minutes, Teaching of Psychology, 34\(2\), pp.85-89.](#)

## C: TUTORIALS, WORKSHOPS, CLASSROOM TEACHING AND SEMINARS: SMALL-GROUP TEACHING AND LEARNING

Students often seem to think that large group sessions are more important than smaller ones – which isn't necessarily true, as in small groups they can learn a great deal from each other as well as from tutors. That said, in some disciplines, small-group learning in contexts such as studios, performance-spaces and laboratories can clearly be the centre of the learning experience, and lectures may play a less direct role in the student experience, as they are learning by doing. However, in satisfaction surveys, students' views on lectures tend to be taken more seriously than their views on small group work, and the design of such surveys is often such that it's the formal large group sessions students think of first when giving their feedback. Meanwhile, with continuing institutional drives towards efficiency and cost-effective provision, in some disciplines, small-group teaching has been reduced or even phased out, in favour of big sessions and resource-based or blended learning.

Perhaps, 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; not least the emergent learning outcomes associated with small group work, which help students to equip themselves with skills and attributes they will need for the next stages of their careers – and lives.

### Seminars, Tutorials, Workshops and Classroom Teaching

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 give a short presentation then answer questions and open up discussion on a pre-assigned topic. Here, the tutor's main responsibility can be as facilitator or chairperson.

**Tutorials** can 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 'sitting 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.

**Workshops** tend to be informal interactions often in specialised spaces including studios, practice-based sessions and labs, but can also include problem-classes where the students work individually with the tutor available to provide help and guidance as needed.

**Classroom teaching** is a portmanteau term covering face-to-face sessions that tend to be smaller in scale than lectures but can include sessions where lecture-mode is possible (but not necessarily advisable). Most of what we do in MTU would come under the category "classroom teaching" as the group sizes are small, even though the default mode is to lecture.

### Why do we need small-group teaching?

If small group teaching for some reason had to be discontinued, (or where this has already happened!) the following manifestations could occur:

- Increased drop-out and failure statistics, because students are unlikely to have enough opportunities to gain help with their individual difficulties;
- Increased risk of lecturers remaining unaware of significant problems which students are experiencing until it is too late – with problems turned into assessment failures;
- Students would be much less aware of how well (or indeed how badly) their learning was progressing, as they would miss out on contexts allowing them to gain a great deal of feedback from each other;
- More time would need to be used trying to help those students making appointments for one-to-one help with particular problems which is often the same problem many times over;

- There could be more interruptions to the flow of large group teaching, when it would no longer be possible in a lecture to reply to a question “this is just the right sort of question to discuss in detail in your next small-group session – bring it along then and make sure that it is sorted out to your satisfaction”;
- Increased risk of students who succeed satisfactorily in written assessment scenarios, but who haven’t gained the level of mastery of the subject matter that comes from practising it, discussing it, arguing about it, and explaining it to other people;
- Students would miss out on the opportunity to develop and practise the skills which will enhance their future employability, such as transferable skills connected with teamwork, communication, listening, problem-solving, and developing leadership potential.

### How students sometimes spoil small-group work

Before we look at what we can do to make small-group teaching work well, it is useful to think about some of the things which can get in the way of small-group learning. Later in this section, we’ll return to some of these in more detail in the ‘what can I do when...?’ section, but for now, let’s just list some of the potential problems, starting with some difficulties which some students can cause us.

1. **SOME STUDENTS DON’T TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.** They often seem to regard lectures as much more important than less formal sessions. This is sometimes our fault – if we don’t seem to be taking small-group teaching as seriously as lectures, students are quick to pick up the vibe.
2. **SOME STUDENTS DON’T TURN UP.** This follows on from the problem above, but it makes our job all the more difficult regarding preparing for a small-group session if we don’t know until the last minute what size group we are likely to be working with.
3. **SOME STUDENTS COME UNPREPARED.** They turn up without having done the pre-reading or preparatory work which we set in advance of the small-group sessions.
4. **SOME STUDENTS TEND TO DOMINATE.** It can be tiresome for their groupmates, and we may need to change group membership regularly, so that the dominating students are spread around.
5. **SOME STUDENTS ARE ‘PASSENGERS’.** In large-group teaching, we can rarely get everyone to participate actively (though we can try), and passengers/lurkers can usually get away with not contributing. In small-group contexts, however, these behaviours become more noticeable, and we need to try all the harder to make sure that small-group learning is active for all present.
6. **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

Before we look at what we can do to make small-group teaching work well, it is useful to think about some of the things which can get in the way of small-group learning. Later in this section, we’ll return to some of these in more detail in the ‘what can I do when...?’ section, but for now, let’s just list some of the potential problems, starting with difficulties which some students can cause us.

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, or even add some more content!
2. **TUTORS CAN 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 DOMINEERING STUDENTS TO GET AWAY WITH IT, AND FAIL TO ENGAGE ‘SHY VIOLETS’.** We need to find ways of equalising contributions in small groups, such as using interactive tasks to get everyone to contribute ideas before opening up for discussion.
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 what students can be expected to achieve in small-group sessions.
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 reasonable exam questions to expect, and other parallel groups do not have this discussion, the latter are disadvantaged. If you do have crucial issues cropping up in one of the parallel sessions, it might be helpful to make your responses available either in the next large group session or on Canvas.

### Some ways we can 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 passion for the subject – enthusiasm is infectious. We can also make it obvious that we have students’ best interests at heart and want them to succeed. If tutors seem bored with a subject and going through the motions, it is hardly surprising that students will not be excited by it!
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 with their learning and helping them to see exactly what they need to become able to do to succeed. This boils down to making it very clear what sort of evidence of achievement they need to be working towards. It also helps if we remind students that this is going to be perfectly manageable for them, and that even the most complex outcomes are achieved one small step at a time.
3. **MAKE SURE STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THAT LEARNING HAPPENS BY DOING.** Help them to see that very little happens just sitting looking at some materials on-screen or in print, but that learning starts when they engage actively with the materials. Also, help them to see that learning happens one step at a time, and that even the most difficult tasks can be broken down into small steps. When learning from books, articles, or on-screen resources, two useful maxims are “not much learning will happen unless you’ve got a pen in your hand and are using it” – or “you should be annotating on-screen materials with your own notes, comments, and questions”. In other words, in small-group sessions, tutors can help students not to ‘drift’, but to make notes, jot down questions, practice answering questions, and so on while working with learning resource materials.
4. **MAKE SURE THAT STUDENTS GET QUICK AND USEFUL IN-CLASS LIVE FEEDBACK.** Help them to assess their own achievements, and to reflect on things they have done successfully, and think quite deliberately of what worked in their learning, and why it worked. Even more importantly, we can help students to learn from their mistakes. 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 have gotten 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 them 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’ something – especially when ‘troublesome knowledge’, difficult ‘threshold’ 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 to succeed at assessment with it. All one may be required to do is to use it or apply it, and this may often be done perfectly successfully even without understanding it. In an ideal world it would be good for everyone to understand everything, but in the real-world students are measured on their demonstration of the evidence of achievement, not necessarily understanding. It can in fact be enormously comforting for students who are struggling for a tutor to say “don’t worry that you don’t yet understand this – just keep practising with it, and the understanding will come in its own time”.

6. **MAKE THE MOST OF STUDENT DISCUSSIONS.** In small-group sessions, students can deepen their learning significantly by explaining things to others in the group, and often hearing a fellow-student explain something can be more understandable than when the tutor tries to explain it.
7. **USE SMALL-GROUP CONTEXTS TO GUIDE STUDENTS THROUGH HOW ASSESSMENT WORKS.** Build their assessment literacy by letting them see how assessment criteria are applied in practice by their assessors. Help them to get into assessors' minds. Even better, get students themselves assessing examples of work (good, bad, and indifferent examples) so they can internalise the assessment criteria, and do high-level learning-by-assessing. This can be one of the most powerful things to do in small-group contexts, and it's regarded as so useful by students that the tendency for them to shrug-off the importance of small-group sessions is significantly overcome.



#### Want to read more?

See Meyer, J.H. and Land, R., 2006. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: an introduction. In *Overcoming barriers to student understanding* (pp. 27-42). Routledge.

### Various ways of forming sub-groups

Sometimes, even when 'small-group' sessions are on the agenda, we can end up with quite a large group for sessions where we really want everyone to get engaged. Suppose the 'small group' numbers 20 students or more, there's the danger that teaching and learning could revert to lecture-mode. You might prefer to get them into sub-groups of four or five for example. There are several approaches to doing this, each with its own pros and cons.

- **LET THEM FORM THEIR OWN SUB-GROUPS.** These are sometimes called 'friendship' groups because of the likelihood of friends already being close to each other or may be 'geographical' groups chosen on the basis of who is where in the room when the groups are forming. An advantage is that students who like each other or know each other may work well together. A disadvantage is that there will often end up being a 'reject group' based on those students who didn't get quickly into a friendship group, and such students may start the group-work on a sadder note.
- **ALPHABETICAL GROUPS.** Class lists are one way of predetermining the composition of groups. It's a way of forming random groups, but if the same technique is being used by several tutors the group composition may be boringly similar in different subjects.
- **REALLY RANDOM GROUPS.** You could go round the larger group, calling out 'A, B, C, D, E...' and giving each student a letter, then ask 'all the 'As' collect in this corner, all the 'Bs' over there...' and so on.
- **SUCCESSIVELY DIFFERENT GROUPS.** One way of making this happen is to use sticky labels on which you've already written a three-digit code and onto which students can write their preferred names to use as name badges. The code could consist of:
  - A SYMBOL (triangle, asterisk, square, or sticky coloured dots);
  - A LETTER (A, B, C, etc);
  - A NUMBER (1, 2, 3, etc).

The first group membership could be 'all the people with the same symbol collect together...'; then the second group task could be 'please go into groups by letter – the 'As' over here, the 'Bs' there...' and so on, and finally the third group arrangement could be 'all the '1s' here please, the '2s' there, and so on. That way everyone will be in an entirely different group three times over, and students will interact successively with a significant proportion of the overall population in the whole room. Example of codes for sticky labels, to get 25 students into three different groups:

A1□	B2*	C3	D4+	E5○
A2○	B3□	C4*	D5	E1+
A3+	B4○	C5□	D1*	E2
A4	B5+	C1○	D2□	E3*
A5*	B1	C2+	D3○	E4□

### Deciding on sub-group size

In small-group teaching, it's often useful to divide the students into sub-groups, where the sub-group sizes depend upon what you intend your students to be doing. Learning from and with peers can be very powerful when well facilitated (and indeed when students are working under their own steam, if they've learned to value how useful it can be). Some factors you may take into account are listed below.

- **PAIRS:** these aren't really groups, but the advantages include the fact that it's not easy for one member to be completely inactive.
- **THREES:** this group size is small enough to avoid most of the risks of inactive participants, and big enough to bring together more experience than a pair. A disadvantage is that trios can often end up with two ganging up on the other one.
- **FOURS:** these are 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. This for many is the ideal size to maximise engagement and build a critical mass
- **SIXES AND MORE:** researchers suggest that the larger the group, the more likely it is that students find it easy to be inactive and let others take the strain. Sixes and sevens can be manageable with close monitoring but groups much larger than that rarely work well.

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

- **HELP YOUR STUDENTS TO BECOME READY FOR ASSESSMENT.** This is the sharp end of small group teaching, not least because most forms of assessment involve winners and losers – and it is very uncomfortable to be less successful than your peers. 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.
- **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 timescales 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 way 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.

- **HELP STUDENTS TO MAKE SENSE OF THEIR LEARNING GOALS.** 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 language alien to students – ‘academese’! It is all very well to use phrases such as ‘demonstrate 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 what the standards are that will be applied to this evidence. They need to understand the contexts in which this evidence will be generated – whether it is exams, coursework, practical work, independent work and so on. Small-group contexts are ideal for helping your students to find out exactly what the intended learning outcomes mean in practice.
- **HELP STUDENTS TO SEE THE IMPORTANCE OF BECOMING BETTER AT LEARNING.** Academic literacy skills are important, not just in the context of helping students work their way towards succeeding in their present studies, but for life in general. Students will continue to need to learn new things far beyond the years when they are involved in formal study, and the better they become at being 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 has proved unsuccessful, there are usually useful study skills lessons to be gained from the experience.
- **SUCH SKILLS CANNOT BE DIRECTLY ‘TAUGHT’** – they are (like just about everything else) picked up by doing, practice, trial and error, and 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.
- **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 each task – 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 be completed than a task which has not yet been started. Therefore, tutors can help by making sure that students make a start on key tasks 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.
- **HELP STUDENTS TO BALANCE THEIR EFFORTS.** An important addition to good time-management is good task-management. In other words, you can 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 un-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.
- **HELP STUDENTS TO IDENTIFY QUESTIONS AND SEEK THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS.** ‘If I knew what the exam questions were going to be, I could easily prepare for the exam’ many students say. But they can know what the questions are going to be. ‘Any important piece of information can simply be regarded as the answer to a question’ is a useful way of helping 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 journal article using library databases and Google Scholar to locate reliable sources.
  - Ask other students and see if they know the answer.
  - Ask other people altogether.
  - Ask an expert witness – for example you or a partner or employer.

Encourage students to make question banks of their own. In other words, get them to jot down all the questions which they might later 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 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 ones in practice.

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 regarding which questions are the really important ones, to help to steer students to the main agendas of their learning.

- **HELP STUDENTS TO BECOME BETTER READERS.** Not all students come from backgrounds where walls are lined with bookshelves and where accessing data goes beyond Wikipedia and Google. Not all students devour books, articles, or materials on the internet, or know how to search effectively. Indeed, for many students, mere reading can degenerate into rather desultory scanning and skimming, and 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 materials, but that all that may be needed is to use them successfully to find information from them. In other words, information sourcing, retrieval, and management (whether from text-based or electronic sources) does not necessarily mean reading everything available but homing in on what's important. This goes back to starting reading with questions in mind. If students read a page or screenful, 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, and the 'search' options on web-based materials. Help them to read in 'search and retrieve' mode, so they are looking for particular things, and noting them down or highlighting them as they find them, rather than simply going through page after page vainly hoping that some of the information there will 'stick'. A key source of support is likely to be subject librarians and at MTU the extra learning development available from our [Academic Success Coaches](#), [Academic Learning Centre](#) and [Navigate Programme](#).

- **HELP STUDENTS GET ORGANISED ABOUT THEIR REVISION.** Most 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 materials in repetitive non-productive ways and become disillusioned.

A good start is for tutors to reinforce that revision is simply about systematically using knowledge well to be able to use it effectively and become 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 similar questions 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 a lot of 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 – if it were important it would have been there among those intended outcomes.

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 assessment, and the best revision processes involve purposeful practice at evidencing that achievement.



### Want to read more about academic literacies?

See:

- Chapter six of [Brown, S. \(2014\) \*Learning, teaching and assessment in higher education: global perspectives\*, London: Palgrave-MacMillan.](#)
- [Stella Cottrell, S. \(2019\) \*The Study Skills Handbook\*, London, Palgrave.](#)

## 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?

As with large group settings, 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 the experience of the light dawning, tasks they found valuable doing, and so on), the word can get around and attendance can improve.
- **IF POSSIBLE, GET FELLOW STUDENTS TO DO THE HEAVY LIFTING.** Ask some alumni/previous year’s students to describe, live or on video, how they benefited from doing the tasks and what it helped them learn.
- **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 you 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, assignments or other required activities (e.g., preparation for placements), 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! Have them answer a question or two on Canvas. If you did this at the start, you could use this to assess prior or current knowledge and perhaps tailor the session based on that feedback. Or you could do it at the end to assess learning. If the sessions were more discussion based or group problem-solving you might be able to use a simple peer review or peer assessment process to reward participation?

### 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.** It sometimes happens that they won’t participate because they can’t see what needs to be done, so you may need to repeat your briefing with further explanation. It can be useful to say ‘what it really means is...’ and then put it into straightforward language.
- **SHOW THE TASK ON A SLIDE.** Sometimes, students can get the gist of a task much better if they can see it and hear it at the same time.
- **TRY TO FIND THE BLOCK.** For example, ask students “Which part of the task are you having problems with?” and see if clarifying that part helps them to get started.
- **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 around any pairs which still seem reluctant to start the task and find out more about what could be stopping them.
- **SET A PRECISE TIMESCALE FOR THE FIRST PART OF THE TASK.** Sometimes this is enough to get them started.

- **RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO KEEP TALKING.** Stop talking and wait expectantly, making it clear that you expect them to get stuck into the task. A few seconds of expectant silence may seem interminable to you, but the resistance to getting started with the task may be fading away. You might even try leaving the room with the expectation that they will all be on task by the time you get back.

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

This is more likely to come to the surface in small groups than in large groups. The following tactics can help.

- **RE-ARRANGE GROUP MEMBERSHIP PERIODICALLY.** 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, 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 other 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.
- **RECOGNISE THAT SOME STUDENTS JUST FIND INTERPERSONAL INTERACTION REALLY DIFFICULT.** This may be due to personality issues or may be caused by discomfort sometimes associated with Asperger's syndrome or being on the Autism spectrum. If it is either of the latter, you may be able to make reasonable adjustments to the task you are asking them to undertake.

#### 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...

- **AGREE COLLECTIVELY APPROPRIATE GROUND-RULES AT THE START OF SMALL-GROUP WORK.** It can be useful to discuss leadership and followership – making the point that in many small-group situations in real life, too many or too dominant leaders can mitigate against success, and that everyone needs to be able to be a good follower for at least some of the time. This isn't a reality show where only one can win!
- **RE-ARRANGE GROUP MEMBERSHIP REGULARLY.** This means that any domineering students are moved around the cohort so that the same one doesn't impact on other students for too long.
- **INTERVENE FIRMLY BUT POWERFULLY.** For example, after the excessively dominant student comes to a pause, ask "Let's provide a chance for someone else now to add to the discussion please?".
- **HAVE A QUIET WORD.** Do this with the student concerned outside the group context, for example, giving suggestions about 'air time' and allowing everyone's views to be heard. Help them to understand the benefits of being effective in a group context in terms of future employability and life skills
- **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.
- **BE AWARE AND DEAL WITH DOMINATION WITH SEXIST OR RACIST OVERTONES.** Make it clear that this will not be tolerated, and that MTU is a university that values the inputs of all students equally.



### Want to read more?

See:

- Exley, K. and Dennick, R. (2004) *Small group teaching: Tutorials, seminars and beyond*, Routledge
- Jaques, D. and Salmon, G. (2007) *Learning in groups: A handbook for face-to-face and online environments*. Routledge.

## Checklists

### Checklist when preparing your small-group session

QUESTION	Yes	Not Yet	N/A	Action Planning
Do I know how many small-group sessions I will be running with this class?				
Do I know whether I'll be taking all of the class in separate repeated sessions, or whether other colleagues will be running parallel small-group sessions alongside mine?				
Do I know what form the small-group sessions will take? Will it be tutorials (in other words led by me) or seminars (where I'll get students to prepare and lead elements), or workshops in a practice session, or classroom sessions or a mixture of all of these?				
Do I know the sequencing of the small group sessions – pre or post the associated lecture?				
Have I worked out the intended learning outcomes for these students, in accessible language I can share with the students?				
Do I know where these small-group sessions fit in to the overall programme/course or module my students are studying?				
Do I know whether I'll be using the same teaching room for all of these sessions with these students and what any specialist facilities are like in it?				
Have I prepared task-briefings for work students should do before the sessions? Are they likely to actually do these?				
Have I prepared task-briefings for a range of possible tasks students could do during the sessions?				
Have I prepared materials, web links on Canvas and other accessible resources to accompany these sessions e.g., manuals, lab guides and checklists?				
Do I know whether any equipment I may need in these sessions is available in the rooms concerned?				

## Review checklist after running a small-group session

Question	Very well	Quite well	Not well	Action Planning
Did I introduce and explain the intended learning outcomes clearly to the students?				
Did the session work well in terms of these outcomes – did most of the students achieve the outcomes?				
Did the activities I planned for the students work out well in practice? If not how could I improve them?				
Did I manage to involve all of the students in doing things during the session?				
For seminar-type sessions, did I manage to let students themselves play a full part in delivering their contributions?				
Did I succeed in getting the students to work together in different combinations, so that they made the most of working collaboratively?				
Did I manage not to intervene too readily if the students ‘got stuck’ temporarily?				
How well was I able to use the small-group session to address questions and problems raised by individual students?				
Did I bring the session to a rounded and punctual close?				
What was the best thing about this particular small group session??				
What was the least satisfactory thing about this particular small group session?				
What is the single most-important thing I will do differently next time I run a similar session?				

## D: ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK: TWO CENTRAL DRIVERS FOR SUCCESSFUL LEARNING



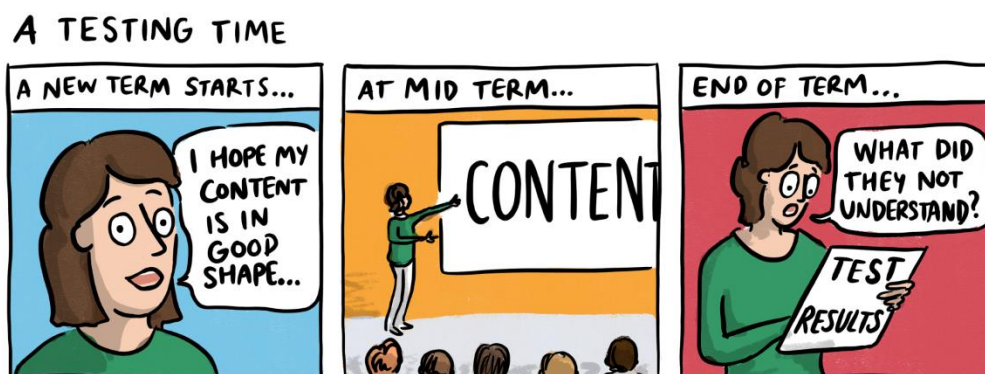
### Why are Assessment and Feedback so important?

Nothing we do affects students more. If we get our assessment wrong, students' whole lives or careers could be jeopardised. And developmental, dialogic feedback is vital to students, so that they can be praised for what they do well, and learn from their mistakes, and improve their next piece of work on the basis of our feedback.

We may have 'lecturer' in our job title, but for most of us we actually spend a significant part of our time on designing student assignments and exams, marking students' work, and giving students feedback on their progress. For many new to teaching in higher education, our roles in assessment and feedback are real 'in at the deep end' experiences, and we can feel very much out of our depth. Sometimes it can feel as if we're expected automatically to be skilled at making assessment decisions, and letting students know why and how we did this!

### Summative and Formative Assessment

'Summative' assessment is normally measured at the end of an element of learning – for example end-of-module exams. Students usually get the results as marks or grades and may sometimes not get any further feedback (for example on their exam performance). The purpose of summative assessment is to make a judgment, to 'sum up' performance outcomes, so it is normally end point.



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'Formative' assessment is often used throughout the programme/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, so as to make their next piece of assessed work better. With large classes, the time it takes us to give students effective formative feedback increases, and the danger is that the quality of the

feedback is reduced by the pressure on assessors. The principal purpose of formative feedback is to form, shape and transform students' performance, so it tends to be incremental.

Of course, both formative and summative assessment can be blended, so formative feedback often includes numbers or grades and summative assessments, like a major project, will often include formative commentaries.

### Assessment matters to students

Students are often quite strategic about their learning – if it counts towards their overall qualifications they will engage fully with what is being asked – if it doesn't, many won't pay much attention to it! This, in fact, is an intelligent response to the situation students often find themselves to be in – a heavy burden of coursework assessment and looming exams, with frequently other significant calls on their time beyond study, requiring them to prioritise whatever they deem essential.

Yet assessment and feedback are very often the areas where students are least satisfied with their experiences of higher education, as shown (for example) by the data from national students' surveys in Ireland, the U.K. and many other nations.

It may be the case that students who are highly successful in assessment tend to be perfectly satisfied with the feedback they get, and that much of the 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 more formative feedback early enough to improve their performance.

### The Sharp End of Learning and Teaching

Because assessment is so important and personal to students, emotions can run high. Students can be very sensitive to the language we use when we give them feedback, particularly when our feedback is just words on paper or on-screen, without the encouraging smiles, warmth and humanity which can accompany face-to-face feedback. It is all too easy for us, despite our best intentions, to damage students' 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 or to comment on positive features of the work as well.

Assessment is at the sharp end for us too, as if things go wrong we can have very unhappy students, and our assessment judgements can be challenged, and we are likely to be under the scrutiny of external examiners. It can also be for academics one of the key causes of excessive stress and pressure when it feels unmanageable.

### Fit-for-Purpose Assessment is Valid, Reliable, Transparent, Authentic, Inclusive – and Manageable!

These terms are widely used in higher education professional practice but what do they actually mean?

**VALIDITY** is about making sure that we're using assessment to measure exactly what we set out to measure – students' evidence of achievement of what we said they should be able to know and do in the intended learning outcomes. We need therefore to make sure that we know exactly which intended learning outcomes each element of assessment is addressing. But sometimes validity can be compromised by the form of assessment we choose – for example traditional exams sometimes end up measuring how well students can write about what they know, rather than how well they can use and apply the information.

**RELIABILITY** is about making sure that we're being fair and consistent, and that each mark or grade is accurate and realistic. If two different assessors marked the same piece of work using the agreed criteria, they should end up with broadly the same mark/grade (inter-assessor reliability). Fairness really matters to students, and they're very quick to notice any irregularities in our practice. This means that we've got to make a well-honed marking scheme for each element of assessed work (whether it is an exam question, an essay, a report, a presentation, or many other possibilities) so that we can be sure that we're being equally fair to all of our students. When there's a really good marking scheme, different assessors will normally reasonably readily agree on the marks to be awarded for particular exam answers or assignments. Also, there won't be any significant variation in the standard of marks you

give from the first piece of work to the last piece of work in the pile – this is actually quite difficult for us to achieve, even for very-well-practised assessors, but can be achieved if we regularly scrutinise evidence against the criteria!

**TRANSPARENCY** means we have to make sure that our students know how assessment works. Therefore, assessment shouldn't involve guessing games about what is actually being sought. 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.

**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 – in other words that they haven't copied it or downloaded chunks from the web. At least in traditional exam situations, we're fairly sure about whose work it is, so long as effective invigilation is undertaken. The term 'contract cheating' is now used for students commissioning or purchasing work to use as their own efforts in coursework assignments and is a really complex problem to counter, since it isn't readily detected with anti-plagiarism software like Ouriginal. 'Academic integrity' needs to be assured. But plagiarism and contract cheating can largely be problems of our (or our university's) own making. We need to design assignments that make it really difficult for students to plagiarise, by making what we assess more clearly students' individual efforts (for example critical incident accounts, reflective logs, and so on) and perhaps include regular checkpoints, especially for major assignments, which require students to discuss progress with us incrementally.

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! We must therefore ensure that we choose and use appropriate methodologies and approaches to fit the student cohort, the level, the context, and the subject discipline.

**INCLUSIVITY** in assessment is in many ways the hardest to achieve! It's about doing everything in our power to avoid discriminating against anyone who may be disadvantaged in any way – whether having physical or mental problems, learning in a second or third language, being in a minority group in a large cohort – and so on. We've got to strive to make our assessment tasks as straightforward and transparent as possible to all students, so that they each know what they're trying to do with them. The better we know all the students we're assessing, the easier it becomes to avoid disadvantaging any of them in assessment, but it is then difficult to plan assessments before meeting the student cohort, as each cohort will bring its own surprises!

**MANAGEABILITY** has two sides – assessment needs to be manageable for us – and for our students. In many countries, it can be argued that there's too much assessment, and that because of all the pressure this causes that it doesn't work very well. 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 (merely ticking 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.



#### Want to read more?

See:

- Chapters 7 and 8 of [Brown, S. \(2015\) \*Learning, teaching and assessment in higher education: global perspectives\*, London: Palgrave-MacMillan](#), on fit-for-purpose assessment
- Adams, M. and Brown, S. (2006) *Towards inclusive higher education: supporting disabled students*, London: Routledge, on inclusive assessment

## Beyond Exams, Essays and Reports

Traditionally in higher education in several countries, there has for a long time been too much emphasis on written assessment, and students' qualifications have depended too much on their skills relating to quite a narrow range of ways of demonstrating their achievement of the intended learning outcomes: answering exam questions, writing essays and writing reports. There are many alternatives, including:

- **COMPUTER-MARKED MULTIPLE-CHOICE TESTS OR EXAMS:** once set up, the technology can handle 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. It can also help to manage data analysis related to assessment. 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. It should never be regarded as a quick fix.
- **SHORT-ANSWER EXAMS OR TESTS:** these can reduce the effect of students' slow speed of handwriting and can allow us to 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 five most relevant sources on a particular idea or topic, then review them critically, comparing and contrasting them in only (say) 300 words. This can cause students to think more deeply about the topic than they may have done if writing a 3000-word essay (and the annotated bibliographies are much faster to mark). Extra value can be added in terms of information literacy if they are also asked to provide a rationale for their information sources.
- **PORTFOLIOS OF EVIDENCE:** these can take even longer to assess than essays or reports if sensible constraints in terms of size or volume are not put in place but can test far more than mere essay-writing or report-writing skills, since submitted elements tend to be organised around learning outcomes demonstrated, and many regard portfolios to be a much more 'rounded' and authentic form of assessment.
- **ORAL PRESENTATIONS:** these can focus on important skills that would not be addressed or assessed through written assessment formats, for example in individual or group presentations. It's worth remembering, however, that some students can be quite terrified of speaking under pressure, particularly before audiences, however important it may be in their later careers, so if used, it's worth checking how they relate to specified learning outcomes.
- **VIVAS (ORAL EXAMS):** these 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). However, some students can be disadvantaged by being terrified of being put on the spot in this way – even though they may need to do this in their future careers. Creating good rapport with the class, reassuring students of the value of the assessment and ensuring a safe and effective learning and assessment space where students see this as an opportunity to show what they know is essential to success with this style of assessment.
- **IN-TRAY EXAMS:** much more 'real life' testing situations, where instead of a question paper on the exam-room desk there is a folio of documents, which students need to study and prioritise in the opening part of the exam, before the questions are issued. They then use the folio to answer relatively short, sharp decision-making questions which can be issued at intervals throughout the exam.
- **OPEN-BOOK (OR 'OPEN-NOTES') EXAMS:** where students don't have to rely on memory and have with them the texts or materials of their choice (or a known-in-advance selection of texts and papers), and where the exam questions test what they can do with the information already on their desks. Another approach is to get students to prepare a 'cheat sheet' – they like doing this. If students are unprepared for these kinds of exams however, they may be tempted to just write out what they have available, so careful briefing is essential.

- **POSTER DISPLAYS:** These involve students preparing posters (typically A1 in size), including text and image individually or collectively for display and critique by tutors and possibly peers. Such posters are nowadays a common feature of academic and professional life so can be authentic assignments where students' individual or collaborative ability to explain complex information succinctly and clearly can be tested, and design and originality can be among the attributes measured. With the recent requirement by employers for enhanced IT skills, embedding the use of technology on occasion through the course is worth considering, hence asking students to develop e-Posters using different freely available software packages to enrich their poster is also an innovative option.

## Setting Exam Questions

Often, only on the first occasion when they mark exam scripts do lecturers first become aware of just how sensitively the questions need to be designed, and how clearly the assessment criteria and marking schemes need to be laid out to anticipate as many as possible of the different ways that even the most unambiguous looking question can turn out to be answered in practice. If you find yourself 'in at the deep end' regarding setting exam questions, the suggestions below may help to spare you from some of the headaches which can result from hastily drafted and ill-thought through exam questions.

1. **TRY TO AVOID DOING IT ON YOUR OWN!** Make sure you get feedback on each of your questions from more experienced colleagues. They can often spot whether your question is at the right level more easily than you can. Having someone else look at one's draft exam questions is extremely useful. It is better still when all questions are discussed and moderated by teams of staff. Where possible, draft questions with your colleagues. This allows the team to pick the best questions from a range of possibilities, rather than use every idea each member has.
2. **IT CAN BE HELPFUL TO GET ONE OR TWO COLLEAGUES, ALUMNI OR STUDENTS IN HIGHER LEVELS OF STUDY TO ACTUALLY ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS – OR EVEN TO DO IT YOURSELF!** Sometimes even sketched out answers can be helpful. This may be asking a lot of busy colleagues, but the rewards can be significant. You will often find that they answered a particular question in a rather different way than you had in mind when you designed the question. Being alerted in advance to the ways that different students might approach a question gives you the opportunity to accommodate alternative approaches in your marking scheme, or to adjust the wording of your question so that your intended or preferred approach is made clear to students.
3. **IT'S WELL WORTH HAVING YOUR INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES IN FRONT OF YOU AS YOUR DRAFT YOUR QUESTIONS.** It is all too easy to dream up interesting questions which turn out to be irrelevant to what you said students would be able to know and do. Furthermore, it is possible to write too many questions addressing a particular learning outcome, leaving other outcomes unrepresented in an exam.
4. **NEVER, EVER, SET OUT TO TRICK YOUR STUDENTS BY WRITING AMBIGUOUS QUESTIONS** This is unfair on students, especially those from disadvantaged or international backgrounds and never ends well!
5. **IT CAN HELP A LOT TO 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. This also helps reduce any discrimination against those students whose second or third language is English.
6. **WORK OUT WHAT YOU'RE REALLY TESTING BY THINKING HARD ABOUT THE VERBS.** Is each question measuring decision-making, strategic planning, problem solving, data processing (and so on), or is it just 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. In any case, external scrutineers of your assignments may interrogate you about whether your questions (and your assessment criteria) link appropriately with the published learning outcomes for your course or module.
7. **TRY NOT TO MEASURE THE SAME THINGS AGAIN AND AGAIN.** For example, it is all too easy for essay-type exam questions to repeatedly measure students' skills at writing good introductions, firm conclusions, and well-structured arguments. Valuable as such skills are, we are likely to need to be measuring other important things too in many applied and practical subjects.

8. **THINK ABOUT INCLUDING DATA OR INFORMATION IN QUESTIONS TO REDUCE THE EMPHASIS ON MEMORY.** In some subjects, case-study information is a good way of doing this. Science and Social Science exams often tend to be much better drafted than those in other subjects in this respect, and it is always appropriate to be concentrating on testing what candidates can do with data rather than how well they remember facts and figures at higher education level especially given the ready access to information on the web nowadays.
9. **CHECK THE TIMING.** You'll sometimes find that it takes you an hour to answer a question for which candidates have only half-an-hour assigned. Assessors setting problem-type questions for students often forget that familiarity with the type of problem profoundly influences the time it takes to solve it. Students who get stuck on such a question may end up failing the exam more through time mismanagement than through lack of subject-related competence. A good rule of thumb is to allow students double the time that it would take you to write a model answer to the question, to allow them to create their own answers in the pressure of an exam room.
10. **WORK OUT WHAT THE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA WILL BE.** Check that these criteria relate clearly to the intended learning outcomes. Make it your business to ensure that students themselves are clear about these intended outcomes, and emphasise the links between these and assessment. When students are aware that the expressed learning outcomes are a template for the design of assessment tasks, it is possible for them to make their learning much more focused.
11. **IT CAN BE USEFUL TO WORK OUT A TIGHT MARKING SCHEME FOR YOURSELF.** Imagine that you are going to delegate the marking to a new colleague. Write it all down. You will find such schemes an invaluable aid to share with future classes of students, as well as colleagues actually co-marking with you, helping them to see how assessment works.
12. **IT'S WORTH PROOF-READING YOUR EXAM QUESTIONS CAREFULLY.** Be aware of the danger of seeing what you meant, rather than what you actually wrote! Even if you're very busy when asked to check your questions, a little extra time spent editing your questions at this time may save you many hours sorting out how to handle matters arising from any ambiguities or errors which could have otherwise slipped through the proof-reading process.



**Want to read more about assignment design?**

See Chapter 2 of [Race, P. \(2015\) \*The Lecturer's Toolkit, 4th edition: Abingdon: Routledge.\*](#)

## Designing Marking Schemes

Whether you're assessing exam answers or students' assignments, the time spent designing a good marking scheme can save you hours when it comes to marking a pile of scripts, or a batch of assignments submitted online. It can also help you to know (and show) that you are doing everything possible to be uniformly fair to all students. As your marking schemes should normally be shown to people including external examiners and quality reviewers, it's important to design schemes in the first place so that they will stand up to such scrutiny. The following suggestions should help:

1. **TRY WRITING A MODEL ANSWER OR KEY NOTES 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! Making model answers and marking schemes for coursework assignments can give you good practice for writing exam schemes.
2. **SEE IF YOU CAN MAKE EACH ASSESSMENT JUDGEMENT 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, or on a readily recognisable scale for each criterion, e.g.,:

- a. **5 points:** Outstanding, couldn't really have hoped for or expected more,
  - b. **4 points:** Very good, answers the question well but could have gone further in places,
  - c. **3 Points:** Good, main areas covered reasonably well, but some omissions, flaws, etc,
  - d. **2 Points:** Just good enough, many gaps but enough to merit a bare pass,
  - e. **1 Point:** Not good enough, some valuable elements but many omissions and flaws,
  - f. **0 Points:** Absent, nothing in the answer that matches the criterion.
3. **STRIVE TO ACHIEVE GOOD RELIABILITY OF MARKING:** 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 schemes. They will soon help you to identify areas where the marking criteria may need clarifying or tightening up.
  4. **PLAN AHEAD CONCERNING 'CONSEQUENTIAL' MARKS:** For example, when a candidate makes an early mistake in a mathematical problem, 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 SCHEME BY SHOWING IT TO OTHERS:** It's worth even showing marking schemes 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 scheme is not yet sufficiently self-explanatory. Extra detail you add at this stage may help you to clarify your own thinking and will certainly assist any fellow markers.
  6. **LEARN BY LOOKING AT WHAT OTHERS HAVE DONE IN THE PAST:** If it's your first time writing a marking scheme, looking at other people's ways of doing them will help you to focus your efforts. Choose to look at marking schemes from other subjects that your students may be studying, to help you tune in to the assessment culture of the overall course/programme.
  7. **BE READY TO LEARN FROM YOUR OWN MISTAKES:** We all make them – even when very experienced at marking. No marking scheme is perfect. When you start applying it to a pile of scripts or batch of online submissions, you will soon want to start adjusting it. Keep a note of any difficulties you experience in adhering to your scheme and take account of these next time you have to make a marking scheme.
  8. **BE VERY CAREFUL ABOUT KEEPING SUMMATIVE ASSESSED TASKS SECURE:** Never leave paper versions lying around and make sure electronic versions you share only go to trusted colleagues/reviewers.

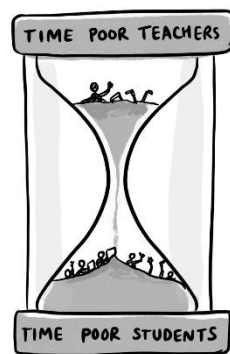
### Assessing students' exam answers and summative assignments

Particularly when you're under pressure to assess a lot of exam scripts, or students' assignments in a short time, the following suggestions may help you to do so fairly and efficiently.

1. **TRY TO REMAIN REALISTIC ABOUT WHAT YOU CAN DO.** Put work for assessing into manageable amounts. For example, it is less intimidating to have ten scripts on your desk and the rest out of sight than to have a large pile threatening you as you work.
2. **THINK ABOUT HOW BEST TO TACKLE THE ASSESSMENT LOAD.** You may prefer to assess a whole script at a time, or just Question 1 of every script first. The advantage with correcting all the Question 1's first is that you just have to keep the marking scheme for that question in mind. After a few questions you will probably have that scheme memorised which makes the marking process a bit more efficient. It will also enhance our marking consistency as it is easier to recall how we have previously marked that same question. Do what you feel comfortable with and see what works best for you.
3. **DON'T TRY TO ASSESS FOR UNREALISTIC PERIODS WITHOUT A BREAK.** Research suggests you are likely to compromise your intra-assessor reliability if you do so, so stop every hour to look out of the window or walk round the room, stop at least every three hours for a proper break of at least 30 mins, ideally leaving the marking room altogether, and don't expect to do more than eight hours at a stretch.
4. **REMAIN AWARE OF THE DANGER OF HALO EFFECTS.** If you've just assessed 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. If assessment isn't anonymous, it's always easy to think, "This isn't as good (or bad) as his/her normal work so I must be marking it wrong". Try to ensure that you assess each answer dispassionately and objectively.

Conversely, when you look at the next student's answer, you may be overly critical if you've just assessed a brilliant one.

5. **BE AWARE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF BIAS/PREJUDICE.** There will be all sorts of things which you like and dislike about the style and layout of students' work, not to mention handwriting quality in exam scripts. Make sure that each time there is a 'benefit of the doubt' decision to be made, it is not influenced by such factors.
6. **BE MINDFUL WHEN YOU ARE MARKING WORK BY NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH.** Be aware that what you see as many mistakes may be a single error repeated many times. For example, in some languages there is no definite and indefinite article ('a' or 'the') so the feel of the language may be very wrong.
7. **RECOGNISE THAT YOUR ASSESSMENT EFFICACY CAN CHANGE OVER TIME.** Every now and then, check back to work you assessed earlier, and see whether your generosity has increased or decreased. Be aware of the middle-mark bunching syndrome, especially when you get tired, since it tends then to feel safe and easy to give a middle-range mark. Try as far as possible to look at each script afresh.
8. **TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE NEEDS OF SECOND MARKERS.** If someone else will be double marking the work, don't make written comments on the scripts themselves, to avoid prejudicing the judgement of a second marker (unless of course clean copies have already been made of each script for double marking, or if you're assessing online, and are each seeing the 'raw' assignment or answer).



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“TIME IS WHAT  
WE WANT MOST,  
BUT WHAT  
WE USE WORST.”

WILLIAM PENN

## Making the most of feedback and feed-forward to students

Every encounter with students has dialogue possibilities, one-to-one, small-group and whole-group. Every dialogue with students is a useful part of your teaching role, including the informal ones, and is every bit as important as preparing and giving lectures, and all the other things you do day-to-day in your job.

When it comes to feedback, there is no doubt that the most important part in students' eyes is the feedback they receive on assessed work, particularly written commentaries. Moreover, the most important part of feedback to students is in fact 'feed-forward' – that which helps students make their next piece of assessed work better, building on strengths and learning from any weaknesses of the last piece of work. It is now increasingly recognised that the best way of ensuring that feedback and feed-forward are useful to students is that there are dialogues between assessors and students, not just written comments about the work being assessed.

Moreover, we should never underestimate the amount of feedback and feed-forward students can derive from each other, and the role we can play in maximising the opportunity for students to learn from each other in small and large groups – and of course way beyond the confines of timetabled teaching-learning sessions.

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 (which missed most of the benefits of face-to-face dialogue, with tone of voice, body language, gesture, facial expression all adding to the value of the feedback);
- Face-to-face feedback, where tutors discussed students' work with them, individually or in small group tutorials (and where dialogue is natural). This tends to be very common in very well-resourced, traditional HEIs, but less so in ones with higher pressure on finances.

Although these two methods are still in use, with growing student numbers in many disciplines there are often just too many students needing too much feedback for either process to be practicable any longer with other than small cohorts. In any case, handwritten feedback is now used less and less, being replaced by electronic feedback (mandated in many HEIs nowadays), often derived from voice-to-text software.

It can be argued that the most valuable feedback (and feed-forward) we can give students is in the form where face-to-face dialogues are possible. For example, it can be really valuable to give a large group feedback on an assignment during a short session at the start of a lecture. This can allow us to cover all the most important points we need to make, with the advantage for students of our tone of voice, emphasis, body language, facial expression, and gesture. This is particularly helpful at the start of the learning process, in the first six weeks of the first semester of the first year, when students may be struggling to find their feet. Feedback in a large group also allows students to see how their own learning and work compares with that of their fellow-students.

It can be helpful to make video or audio recordings of such shared feedback opportunities, and to upload these for sharing through Canvas, and this approach can also be adapted to provide dialogue opportunities for distance or blended learning courses/programmes.

The value for including feedback dialogues within tutorials and seminars has already been explored earlier in this resource. However, there is still usually a strong expectation and culture of providing students with text-based feedback (which can indeed usefully focus on feed-forward), but without the face-to-face dimensions mentioned above. When we need to provide text-based feedback, we can now choose from options addressing some of the factors below. You could:

- **USE VOICE RECOGNITION SOFTWARE TO DRAFT TEXT:** Many people can talk quite a lot faster than they can type or write and many voice recognition (VR) software options allow you to speak into your phone or computer, and edit the resulting text much faster than it would have been to use a keyboard directly.
- **CONSIDER ASSEMBLING A STATEMENT BANK OF COMMENTS YOU WRITE REPEATEDLY:** This can be your collection of often-needed feedback explanations and frequently used comments which apply to the work of many students, and you can then stitch these comments together to make the feedback relevant to student's individual pieces of work.
- **PROVIDE FEEDBACK BY EMAIL OR VIA THRE VLE:** We can email feedback directly to students or provide feedback via Canvas so that they can study our feedback in the comfort and privacy at their computers. When using VR software for this, it can be particularly important to check the wording before one sends or releases it! It's worth not actually sending the emails or releasing feedback until you've really got into your stride with assessing the batch of work, as your early efforts could be too generous or too intimidating. Send/release them all as a batch instead to avoid students having to wait for theirs when others have already received feedback.
- **TRY DRAFTING A COLLECTION OF FEEDBACK COMMENTS ON A PARTICULAR ASSIGNMENT:** This can be prepared on the basis of the work of the class as a whole, based on common errors and frequent difficulties, and can be posted on Canvas for all the class to view, then only needing you to email individual students with any specific additional feedback they need.
- **DESIGN AND USE ASSIGNMENT RETURN SHEETS:** These are typically proformas that you complete including the specific assignment criteria, Likert scales for marks against each criterion and boxes for general and criterion-specific comments (which you can cut and paste from a statement bank). Additionally, if you have already mapped out the feedback agenda for an assignment, (for example based on the intended learning

outcomes or the assessment criteria for the assignment), this can help to map feedback comments to students more systematically.

- **CREATE AN OVERALL FEEDBACK REPORT FOR AN ASSIGNMENT:** This is really useful for giving generic and often repeated feedback on a task set to a large group of students and can cover all the most important mistakes and misunderstandings. For example, assessors regularly want to comment on poor referencing, and it can really help to be able either to paste in detailed guidance or point them towards a virtual resource that does so. It is also possible to refer individual students to the sections relevant to their own work, and still allow you to add minimal individual feedback to students, addressing aspects of their work not embraced by the general report.
- **DEVISE ‘EXPLODED’ MODEL ANSWERS:** These explain not just where an error is made, but why this constitutes a problem and can show students a lot of detail which can be self-explanatory to them, allowing them to compare the model answers with their own work and see what they’ve missed out or got wrong. Model answers can also be useful in showing students struggling to see what is required to see what good work looks like. Ideally prepare more than one sample answer for the same question, showing how excellence can be achieved in very different ways.
- **GAIN SKILLS IN USING ‘TRACK CHANGES’ FACILITIES:** These are available in word-processing packages to edit students’ electronically-submitted essays and reports, so they can see in colour our comments, and the changes made to their work at the click of a mouse on their own screens. We can enter comments on their work, and suggestions for similar tasks next time. This can be a very quick way of giving a lot of detailed feedback and feed-forward, in exactly the right place – interspersed with their words – rather than in a margin or over the page.



#### Want to read more about feedforward?

See Duncan, N. (2007) [‘Feed-forward’: improving students' use of tutors' comments](#). *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(3), pp.271-283.



#### Want to read more about dialogic feedback?

See:

- Chapter 5 of Sambell, K., Brown, S. and Graham, L. (2017) *Professionalism in Practice: key directions in higher education learning, teaching and assessment*, London, New York, Palgrave Macmillan
- Yang, M. and Carless, D. (2013) [The feedback triangle and the enhancement of dialogic feedback processes](#), *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(3), pp.285-297.



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## Feedback to students tends to be most effective when it is:

1. **STRONG ON FEED-FORWARD.** How valuable feedback turns out to be is largely determined by how well it is put to use by students, and this means how much it lends itself to helping them build on existing strengths, and tackle identified weaknesses. ‘This is great – keep doing this!’ can be a very useful comment, helping students to see that it was not a matter of having jumped through a particular hoop successfully, but that it’s useful to build this into their ongoing study strategy.
2. **PROVIDING DIALOGUE POSSIBILITIES.** Often, the real meaning of feedback only really gets across to students when they are able, live or virtually, to question the feedback, giving us the opportunity to explain why it’s important, how exactly to go about putting it into practice and so on. Printed or online words can be the basis of useful dialogue between students and tutors, but it’s more effective if we make sure that the feedback text is only a start and not a finish to the process.
3. **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. Many institutions nowadays specify in their public documents that work will be returned with feedback within two to three weeks, enabling students to derive greater benefits from it, while they still remember and care about the assignment. 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. 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.
4. **PERSONAL AND INDIVIDUAL.** Whole-class feedback has its merits, but ideally feedback needs to fit each student’s achievement, individual nature, and personality. Excessively generic techniques for compiling and distributing 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.
5. **UNDERSTANDABLE.** 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, they should not have to read each sentence more than once, trying to work out what we are really saying. That, of course, is addressed to a great extent when face-to-face feedback is used, allowing all the normal human communication dimensions to come into play, rather than just text.
6. **EMPOWERING.** While feedback is intended to strengthen and consolidate learning, we need to make sure it doesn’t dampen down the desire to continue learning and harm students’ senses of self-efficacy. 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. We must not forget that often feedback is given and received in a system where power is loaded towards the provider of the feedback rather than the recipient. It can be worth reassuring students how much they can benefit from feedback in their later learning, and also in their future careers.
7. **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 be overwhelming and result in them not being able to sort out the important points from the routine feedback, thereby reducing their opportunities to benefit from the feedback they need most. Quantity and quality need to be balanced sensitively for both them and us.
8. **DEVELOPMENTAL.** Feedback should open doors, not close them. In this respect, we have to be particularly careful with the words we use when giving feedback to students. Clearly, words with such ‘final language’ implications as ‘weak’ or ‘poor’ cause irretrievable breakdowns in the communication between assessor and student. To a lesser extent, even positive words such as ‘excellent’ can cause problems when feedback on the next piece of work is only ‘very good’ – why wasn’t it excellent again? Students have a tendency to take the words personally as if they describe them rather than their piece of work, it is therefore important that

we make a clear distinction. Therefore, in all such cases it is better to praise exactly what was very good or excellent in more detail, providing a rationale matched to comments and marking rubrics if used rather than take the short cut of just using the adjectives themselves.



**Want to know more about self-efficacy?**

See Dweck, C. S. (2000) *Self Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality and Development*, Lillington, NC: Taylor & Francis.



**Want to read more about rubrics for assessment?**

See Gough, J. (2006) *Rubrics in assessment, Vinculum*, 43(1), p.8.

### Maximising learning payoff through feedback and feed-forward

The following tactics aim to give you some practical ways in which you can increase the learning payoff associated with your feedback to students and make appropriate use of dialogue and feed-forward rather than just comments on paper or on-screen.

1. **PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH A LIST OF FEEDBACK COMMENTS GIVEN ON 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. **USE TWO-STAGE OR MULTI-STAGE ASSIGNMENTS.** In this way students can submit a draft, or drafts, of their assignment prior to final submission so that students can feedforward what they have learned from the feedback received into their final submission, thereby encouraging students to engage with the feedback by providing opportunities for its use in succeeding interrelated stages of the assignment.
3. **LETTING 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.
4. **FOCUSING YOUR COMMENTS ON STUDENTS' WORK, NOT ON THEIR PERSONALITIES.** Comments need therefore to be about 'their work', rather than 'them'. This is particularly important when feedback is critical.
5. **GETTING 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.
6. **ASKING 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...''.
7. **ASKING 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). This sort of feedback to you can help you adjust how you give feedback to students next time.

8. **INVITING 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.
9. **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 properly integrated.



#### **Want to read more about feedback?**

See:

- Nicol, D. J. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) [Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice](#), *Studies in Higher Education* Vol 31(2), 199-218
- [Sadler, D. R. \(2010\) Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. \*Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education\*, 35\(5\), 535-550.](#)



#### **Want to read more about assessment generally?**

See Brown, S. and Race, P. (2012) *Using effective assessment to promote learning*, in Hunt, L and Chalmers, D. *University Teaching in Focus: a learning-centred approach*, Victoria, Australia, Acer Press, and Abingdon: Routledge.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS:

### Waving, Not Drowning! (AFTER STEVIE SMITH, 1972)

I hope that you have found the suggestions and ideas in 'In at the Deep End' useful to you, and not too terrifying. If you used the checklist near the start of this resource, most of the terms in it should by now feel quite familiar to you.

As you will have realised, the journey towards becoming a skilled facilitator of student learning is a continuous one, and experience counts for more than anything else. Most people, looking back at their first forays into working with students tend to reflect with pleasure on how much better they have become than on those early encounters with teaching, learning, feedback and assessment.

Things continue to change of course. Students change, institutions change, priorities change, higher education systems change, and we all change and adapt to keep up with the demands placed upon us, and the challenges we meet. That said, there is an enormous amount of satisfaction and pleasure to be derived from all the little successes we have in helping students to learn and grow, and in bringing our experience and expertise to bear on helping students to make learning happen, and head towards success. We all have to start at the deep end, it seems, but the joy of becoming able to become a skilled and effective teacher is our reward for all the efforts we put in. Whatever else we need to learn to do as our careers unfold – be it research, administration, leadership or teamwork – teaching and learning are essential parts of our experience and should bring great pleasure to us. None of us is beyond continuing to learn – just like our students.

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<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46479/not-waving-but-drowning> (accessed August 2018)

