7STEPS
WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

7 Steps to:
Enhancing Large Group Teaching

Overview

Lecturing to large groups is among the oldest forms of teaching. Bligh (2000:4) defines it as "more or less continuous expositions by a speaker who wants the audience to learn something". He claims lectures are *as* effective, but *not more* effective than other teaching methods for *transmitting* information and considerably less effective for some aspects of learning. Nonetheless, lectures remain popular for many reasons. They:

- provide current information based on original research;

- can highlight similarities and differences between key concepts;

- communicate an individual's enthusiasm for the subject;

- model how a particular discipline deals with questions of evidence, critical analysis, problem solving;

- allow for material to be tailored to a particular cohort and course objectives;

- allow for the dramatising of important concepts and sharing personal insights;

- are cost-effective.

(Exley and Dennick, 2009; Bligh 2000; Cashin, 1985).

However, lectures can encourage passive learning, and other methods such as discussions, are considered more effective for promoting thought and critical thinking or for changing attitudes or developing skills (Bligh, 2000; Exley and Dennick, 2009; Light *et al*., 2009; McKeachie *et al*., 1990; Ramsden, 1994). Increasing student numbers, higher expectations, and a more diverse range of students' backgrounds and abilities demand improved teaching quality in Higher Education.

Good teaching is as important as good research (Biggs and Tang, 2007). This guide encourages tutors to rethink the use and design of lectures, transforming the lecturing model from a traditional didactic approach to an engaged and interactive one (Light *et al*., 2009). Increasing active learning opportunities and fostering student engagement will help tutors achieve this.

1. Make lectures interactive

Laurillard (2002) explains that the lecturer's role in university teaching is to help students learn, and not simply to impart knowledge. 'Active learning' methods are known to encourage 'deeper learning' (Exley and Dennick, 2009).

Introduce activities/breaks every 15 minutes as attention tends to decrease substantially after that time (Biggs and Tang, 2007). Useful activities include discussion in pairs or larger groups, buzz groups, quizzes, case studies, mini assessments and students clarifying each other's notes (Gibbs *et al.,* 1992; Prince, 2004).

When setting activities clearly explain the task, the time available, the signal to stop, how students' work will be used and feedback methods. Plan breaks for resting, stretching, reflection or planning (Gibbs *et al*., 1992). Use handouts wisely: consider providing additional notes to avoid timing problems or information overload. Interactive notes including key learning points and gaps for student completion can also be effective (Exley and Dennick, 2009).

2. Manage the class effectively

Managing large classes is challenging. Distractions range from inattentiveness to excessive talking. This might relate to the student's background, e.g. some cultures value silence over speech (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999). Generally, students want the tutor to control and challenge disruptive behaviour (Exley and Dennick, 2009). Appleby (1990) concluded that poor teaching behaviour can result in poor student behaviour and vice-versa. Staying calm and establishing mutual respect are therefore important.

Clarify expectations and establish ground rules - applicable to students and tutor(s) - in collaboration with students. Include aspects of organising and running activities (e.g. how to regain students' attention) as well as general behaviour (e.g. no swearing). Avoid public confrontation - there may be underlying reasons for the behaviour (e.g. fear of exposure). Speak privately to the disruptive/non-responsive student instead; possibly you can help. Other non-confrontational approaches include: looking at talking students, approaching them as you continue teaching, questioning someone nearby.

3. Introduce an ethos of participatory and active learning

Laurillard (2002) stresses that for higher level learning, dialogue must occur, enabling students to link theory with practice and allowing tutors to evaluate the appropriateness of set activtities. Experience of active learning in HE may be limited, and students may struggle with and resist more participative methods. Students require preparation in the acceptance and development of interactive techniques (Light *et al*., 2009; Prince, 2004).

Introduce your 'style' of teaching and learning immediately and design activities around important learning outcomes. Students will develop a deeper understanding of important ideas to be learned (Prince, 2004) and tutors can determine if and to what extent learning outcomes have been met. To do this, identify aspectsof knowledge essential to meet the session learning outcomes ('must knows') and design sessions and activities around these. Use former students to communicate expectations and purposes to new students (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999).

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4. Determine a clear session structure and signpost frequently

Clear structures and frequent signposting are important to gain students' attention and ensure they follow the material, understanding context and relevance (Exley and Dennick, 2009). HE curricula are often based on constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2007) which provides a framework for aims and outcomes of programmes, their modules and associated assessments. Session learning outcomes should be embedded within this structure.

Ensure you are familiar with how the module fits into the programme and how your lecture relates to the module and its learning outcomes. Explain this clearly to students through discussion and illustration. Ease navigation by signposting – commence by outlining the session structure and learning outcomes, and revisit them frequently with interim summaries and pointers to what follows.

5. Use technology and visual aids appropriately

When media are used well, audiences find the message more credible (Brown and Race, 2002). Appropriately used audio-visual aids (AVs) enrich presentations. Candidate technologies include projectors, interactive whiteboards, videos, simulations, electronic presentations (Prezi, PowerPoint), online spaces (Tulip, Facebook, Twitter) and classroom response systems (TurningPoint). The latter encourage active learning (Bruff, 2009); students respond to questions and their anonymous answers are instantly shown on screen. This initiates discussion and encourages deep learning rather than the outdated 'covering content' approach (Fry *et al.*, 2003).

Consider introducing pre-prepared AVs to sessions (e.g. TurningPoint questions as a basis for group discussions; video to illustrate concepts) and generating AVs during lectures (e.g. podcasting, e.g. audio recording of the lecture; screen capture of notes on interactive whiteboard). Ensure you know the equipment well. Write clearly on flipcharts without speaking as you write - hearing impaired students may struggle.

6. Explore a constructivist approach

Educational theory suggests people learn best when constructing knowledge and meaning themselves (Bruner, 1996), often through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1986). Evidence shows that collective learning positively affects academic achievement and persistence (Springer *et al.*, 1999). The term 'lecture' implicitly inhibits tutor innovation and active session design. Don't let it!

Enable students to learn from each other. Introduce group work and peer instruction. For example, students can undertake preparatory reading, recording questions that arise. During the 'lecture', students form small groups, answering these questions. You circulate, contributing as necessary. Open up unanswered questions to the entire cohort. If questions remain at the end, you can follow up and provide answers.

7. Make sessions inclusive

Students have varied backgrounds and experiences, shaping their expectations and assumptions of education. Larger groups will have more variability, and "the fewer values, assumptions, and beliefs shared by a group of people who gather to talk, the harder it is for them to understand one another" (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999:101). However, these differences can broaden horizons, enriching teaching and learning. Make your practice inclusive - consider students' cultural backgrounds and accessibility issues, e.g. visual or hearing impairments.

Examples of good practice: Provide content in a variety of formats and media, make session content available online 24 hours ahead, use plain language, provide a glossary of specialist terminology, ensure that examples, illustrations and case studies are universally understood (e.g. avoid specifically British cultural references), allow for latecomers (they may have legitimate reasons), ensure you and your materials are visible and audible.