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The Essential Teaching Skills ebook

An Introduction to Teaching for Early Careers Lecturers

Introduction

This ebook is primarily aimed at those new to teaching in universities; however, they will also help those who are experienced, but new to teaching in the UK or anyone wishing to take time to reflect on their academic practice. Higher education is changing as never before and all of the following issues will have some bearing on your teaching:

Rise in tuition fees: there is an expectation that home students will have higher expectations than ever in terms of teaching, assessment and feedback.

Widening participation: despite cutbacks and changes in what is on offer to disadvantaged pupils, universities are still working hard to ensure that candidates, whatever their background, receive support in making choices and are then supported once at university.

Internationalisation: this features more and more in a university's strategic plan both in terms of curriculum content and delivery, enabling students to operate cross-culturally and be more aware of the opportunities beyond their home country.

Virtual Learning: key to addressing the needs of a greater number of students from increasingly diverse educational backgrounds with fewer resources.

Employability: probably more of a challenge for those universities offering 'traditional' academic courses, even they are considering embedding, or at least highlighting, employability skills in the curriculum.

And the good news is that universities are likely to offer staff involved in teaching more opportunities to develop their practice.

An Introduction to Teaching for Early Careers Lecturers

Teaching in universities is under the spotlight as never before. With the Browne Review ⁽¹⁾ recommending all new teachers should have a teaching qualification, and the rise in tuition fees, students are understandably even keener to get the best teaching possible.

Who should read this ebook?

Anyone new to teaching in universities. You might be a postgraduate delivering seminars, academic tutorials or the occasional lecture. You might be starting your first lecturing post or an experienced academic new to the UK. Or you could be delivering careers workshops, study skills training, IT coaching or a range of training to support the learning and development of students.

What kind of teaching goes on at university?

Lectures: the traditional 50 minute lecture still exists, hopefully spiced up with some interaction with students, lively delivery and creative use of IT and e-learning.

Seminars: often with groups of up to 20, the emphasis is on group-work, interaction, the opportunity for questions, students reporting on their work, following up key lectures in more detail and encouraging students to delve more deeply into their subject.

Tutorials: these can be one-to-one or with just a few students. The focus can be more on reviewing marked work, general academic progress or detailed discussion of a particular topic. **Personal tutoring** has a wider remit to include the personal welfare of a student as well as their academic progress.

How can I prepare before I stand up in front of my students?

- **Research the context:** what's expected of you? Check out department expectations and codes of practice as they vary between universities and indeed departments.
- **Check the profile of your students:** where do they come from? What are the entrance requirements for the course? Ask your colleagues.
- **Line up your advisers:** colleagues, heads of department, new starters like yourself and especially final year students: they know what good teaching is.
- **Research student support:** learning support is available in student services with names like: Learning Support, Wellbeing, Counselling, Senior Tutor, and Welfare. Look at what students are given as part of their induction.
- **Get trained:** Staff and Academic Development departments will run courses, provide resources and networks. Consider various Certificates in Teaching – indeed participation might be a condition of your probation. Search for key words such as Postgraduate Certificate in HE, Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice.

What will my students be like?

Diverse

Some will be like you when you were an undergraduate; most not. Their prior knowledge of your subject will vary as will the type of teaching they have been used to. The key is to be alert, flexible and ensure what you teach and how you teach is accessible to all and therefore **inclusive**.

Understand your students: transition to HE is a huge step and most students are not prepared. Lucky ones might have had taster days, been on summer schools, been part of structured programmes including pre-first year tutorials. And every university year brings its own challenge for the student as they encounter harder concepts, different ways of learning and assessment and think about jobs.

What is effective teaching? A good start is to answer the following:

- **Where do I want students to get to?**
- **What can I do to help them?**

...and for detailed advice on small group teaching and delivering lectures, see the following articles.

(1) Browne Review: 'Securing A Sustainable Future For Higher Education' (2010).

Delivering an Effective Lecture

Even with the widespread use of e-learning and creative use of new types of learning spaces, lecturing is still used to convey new knowledge or skills to a large number of students in a relatively short time. Often they are used to introduce key concepts which are then developed through self-directed learning, seminars and tutorials. They have much more potential than you may have experienced yourself as a student.



Preparation

Context: how does your lecture fit into the curriculum? What has been done before, what will your lecture prepare the students for next? Make explicit connections between earlier teaching and their own experiences.

Aims: what do you want students to have understood and/or be able to do by the end of your lecture? In other words, what are the learning outcomes?

Plan: prepare a logical sequence – think in terms of 15/20 minute sections and at the end of each: recap, restate, change tone, give time for students to reflect, discuss in pairs. Use examples to bring theories and ideas to life.

Accessibility: how will your diverse range of students access what you have to say? Check the advice and support available to lecturers on **inclusive learning**.

Appropriate resources: the methods you use to deliver your lecture should serve your material and the audience. If using PowerPoint, check it's not too text-heavy. Blocks of text and diagrams may be better on handouts. Basic information or background might be better conveyed via your university's online learning / e-learning/virtual learning environment (VLE). This frees up students to make notes on the important stuff: making connections and reflecting on key concepts.

Check the venue: finding an unfamiliar lecture theatre beforehand is essential. Familiarise yourself with the layout, acoustics, IT and logon protocols, remote controls and IT support should you need it on the day. And, even in this day and age, a piece of chalk and a whiteboard eraser can still be really useful.

Be prepared! if the IT doesn't work – have a plan; this does not include just hiding.



Delivery

Establish rapport: make a connection early on; get the students on your side and set a tone. Chat to them as they come in, find out what they are expecting, and introduce yourself at the start of the lecture. The first five minutes sets the tone for the rest of the lecture, and indeed subsequent lectures – you have their attention: make the most of it.

Strong opening: take a deep breath; start confidently, enthusiastically and clearly. don't rush and ensure you're heard. Talk as though you expect attention and understanding, and generally you'll get it.

Avoid reading a speech: use headings and bullet points, this will enable you to sound more conversational, spontaneous and maintain eye-contact.

Voice: your voice is your most important resource. If you can't be heard or understood, there's little point you being there. Check volume, pace and pronunciation by running through the first few minutes of your first lecture with a colleague. And if it's a large lecture theatre, ask those at the back to let you know if they can hear you.

Interaction: ask students to discuss a question for 2 minutes in pairs. This breaks up the activity, allows you to mingle and check their levels of attention and understanding. It also adds variation and keeps your lecture lively.

Closing: the 3 rules of giving a good presentation apply: 'tell them what you're going to say, say it, tell them what you've told them'. So, summarise key points, suggest what they should do to dig deeper, pose some questions to be explored in the following seminars or tutorials and preview the next lecture.

Continuous improvement: the best teachers and lecturers continually get feedback. If you want to know if you're any good:

- Ask a student: ideally set this up before a lecture and ask them to feedback at the end – usual incentives: free food and drink.
- Ask a colleague to observe: ensure the feedback is specific and balanced – what did you do well? where could you improve?

Successful Seminars - Getting the Best from Small Groups

Some of the most exciting and dynamic learning can take place in small groups including field work, laboratory practicals and project work as well as the more traditional seminars. For many Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PGTAs), this might be their most common teaching activity and for some lecturers (and students) new to the UK, small-group teaching may well be a new experience.

Be prepared: understanding the background and context of your session will ensure that you deliver **relevant, challenging, dynamic and accessible learning**.

- How do your sessions fit in with the overall module or scheme of work? What has gone before; how will your session move your students on?
- What is the general profile of your students? If you will be meeting them fairly regularly, consider getting an idea of their background, academic achievements and even learning some names beforehand.
- Attend the lecture that your seminar supports; chat to students afterwards to get instant feedback concerning which issues need further development.

Planning the content: be clear about your aims, objectives and learning outcomes. Have a structure, but build in flexibility so you can work with and around the students' varied knowledge, questions and different learning styles.

- Decide **first** what you want them to learn, and **then** how you can help.
- Consider discussing 'ground rules' with your students – what conditions you can all agree on to make for the best learning experience?
- Be explicit about your expectations, especially those which may not be negotiable e.g. health and safety, punctuality, confidentiality, pre-session preparation.
- Don't try to cover everything: focus on key concepts.
- Draw on the students' expertise and individual experiences.

- Vary the activities: pair discussion, group presentations, role play, reporting back, input from you.
- Think about the interplay between PowerPoint and handouts.
- Timing: have more material than you need.
- Decide how you will find out **during** your session that significant learning is taking place.
- Ensure the students are working at least as hard as you are.

Delivery: small-group teaching is not just an opportunity to lecture to fewer students in a smaller room, but a chance to work closely with students, to delve more deeply into the subject, and as a **facilitator** and **mentor** to develop their skills and to provide the opportunity for **interactive** learning. So:

- Build rapport: greet students as they arrive, try some low-key ice-breakers (e.g. **do** ask them to introduce themselves and think of one question they'd like answered by the end of the session; **don't** get them to hug each other).
- Stress the benefits of participation.
- Start with a simple, 5 minute activity (question on board or on handout).
- Talk to every student within the first few minutes: it establishes your tone and expectations (welcoming, supportive, questioning, challenging), gets everyone involved and you can 'take the temperature' and check out their expectations and what they already know.
- Unless everyone is relaxed, articulate, keen to question and contribute, it's best to avoid open questions to the whole group to start with; it's rarely successful and the answers don't necessarily advance learning or let you know what the whole group has understood.

And most importantly: don't underestimate the importance you have as a role model and someone they may aspire to both in terms of **how** you approach learning and **what** you have to offer them.

Academic Tutor - All-knowing Guru or Best Mate?

The term **tutor** is used to cover a range of academic and welfare support provided by academics who work with individuals or small groups of students. While the focus is on academic development, students' personal lives and their general well-being also impact on their studies and it's important for tutors to be clear how they might respond to these issues even if it's to refer students to professional university support services. This section will be useful for those new to tutoring as well as those wishing to reflect on their current practice.

The range of activities included under the heading 'academic tutoring' includes:

- Giving feedback on assignments
- Study skills support
- Tutorials for distance-learners
- Demonstrating equipment
- Laboratory-based practicals
- Fieldwork
- Choosing options



The term 'tutor' and especially 'personal tutor' can also encompass:

- Welfare issues
- Monitoring overall progress
- Course or module choices
- Writing references
- Signposting to other services such as: disability services, learning support, and careers.

Tutors may meet their tutees from once a week to twice a year depending on the year of study and subject. The tutor might variously be a **mentor, advisor, facilitator, teacher, supervisor, expert, coach** and sometimes a bit of each in the same session.

Preparation – think about the following before your first meeting:

- What exactly is your role and what are the students' expectations? Check any written guidelines/protocols guidelines; talk to experienced colleagues and Senior Tutors or their equivalent. Do you need to keep records?
- What are the boundaries? Sometimes the **personal tutor** role is very clearly defined and these tutors are trained to deal with personal/welfare issues.
- Who else can help students? Your role may include signposting other sources of help to students; don't assume students know what they are. Key areas include: learning support, careers, welfare, students' union or guild, counselling, well-being, chaplaincy, student buddies/mentors.
- What information about the student might help you? check any specific learning needs, previous academic record, modules previously taken.

First meeting – students make choices; they need to be clear how the tutor relationship benefits them to keep them coming back. Build rapport and show you're interested and approachable:

- What's the tutorial for? Get this really clear from the outset. Perhaps start by asking the student what they expect before telling them.
- Are there any ground rules? These can include meeting times and more generally, agreed key components for a successful tutorial. Perhaps ask students to think about this before your first meeting.
- Take a history: ask the student to tell you about their academic life so far; what do they most need help with?

Dynamic Dialogue – the tutorial is a conversation and a great opportunity to really delve into the detail of your subject; to encourage 'deep learning'. The interplay of questions and answers can enable students to realise clearly what they know, what's getting in the way of their learning and to set them off on their own research.

Communication skills - not complex, they just need thinking about:

- Listen actively - even if your prime role is to explain a key concept, take time to listen to check the student understands.
- Question effectively: a few concise, well-timed and challenging questions can be the key to students thinking for themselves. A barrage of questions (which you then impatiently answer yourself) will not develop an independent and enquiring mind.
- Summarise: how do you know the student has learnt from the tutorial? Give them time to reflect, write down what they've learnt and then explain the key learning points to you.
- Avoid: talking non-stop for 50 minutes; student madly scribbling, asking nothing, rushing out of the room and then sending you a constant stream of emails asking you to explain what you thought they had previously understood.

Although you might not be an all-knowing guru with answers to all your students' questions, your role as a teacher and mentor is of course key. As for 'mate' – be approachable and supportive, but be clear on setting boundaries. Aim for 'critical friend' rather than best buddy.



Giving Constructive Feedback and Assessment

One of the most common questions students ask teachers all over the world is 'what did I get?' and 'how am I doing?' and often: 'what do I need to do to get a 2.1?' Assessment and feedback comprises one of the seven sections of the UK's annual National Student Survey www.thestudentsurvey.com/ and the data from the survey shows that there is still room for improvement.

Assessment is not just a grading tool; it is also integral to the learning process. It may be used in a variety of ways in your department, so familiarise yourself with current practice and procedures. Whether **formative** or **summative**, you need to ask yourself these key questions:

- What do you want your students to learn?
- What teaching methods will you use?
- What assessment criteria and tasks will show they have achieved the learning outcomes?

Formative assessment:

- Helps students to see how well they are progressing
- Gives them feedback in time so that they know how they are doing and can improve.
- Provides you with feedback on the effectiveness of your teaching so that you can make adjustments in time to impact on your students' learning.
- Enables students to reflect critically on their own learning which in turn enables them to be more autonomous learners.

The exact nature of the assessment will depend on your subject; some examples are:

- Diagnostic test at the start of a course to check prior knowledge and skills
- Precise verbal questions to groups or individuals in seminars
- Quizzes
- Presentations by individuals or small groups of students
- Assignments which students complete and submit for marking

Timing is key. You need to have time to use the results of the assessment to inform your teaching in time to develop the students' learning.

Summative assessment – often comes at the end of a module or programme and may or may not count toward a final qualification. When devising assessments and marking criteria, it is important to:

- Understand the relevant University-wide advice and codes of practice
- Familiarise yourself with student handbooks and department practice
- Get advice, especially with marking criteria and timescales
- Check that you are not solely responsible for the whole process

Feedback: giving effective feedback can build a students' confidence, transform their understanding and motivation and also help them develop key critical skills. Feedback, especially when linked to formative assessment, tutorials or seminars should focus on looking forward and on how to enhance learning. The following well-known acronym, CORBS, gives a good structure for feedback:



Clear: know what you want to say and say it (or write it) clearly and concisely. Don't try and cover everything: focus on the most important aspects.

Owned: be clear that it is your opinion you are giving. So using 'I believe' instead of 'you are'. If it's not an opinion: e.g. incorrect use of dangerous equipment – say so.

Regular: regular feedback reinforces the message; it also enables a 'feedback rapport' to be established. Feedback needs to be given as close to the event as possible so that students have time to act on your suggestions and apply it in time for the next piece of work.

Balanced: feedback should be a balance of positives and negatives and focus on constructive criticism.

Specific: after receiving feedback, students should be clear what they need to do differently and also what to continue to do well. So: 'that's fine' or '50%' with no comments are not helpful.

And how do you know if the feedback you have given your students is useful? Ask them!



Making the Most of Teaching Observations

Many academics are observed by colleagues from their own or other departments. Sometimes it is part of a formal process, such as a PG Certificate in HE or Professional Development Plan; sometimes it is more informal, perhaps you just want to check you're on the right lines. Whatever the reason, being observed and receiving focussed and balanced feedback has the potential for transforming your teaching and boosting your confidence.

This section will enable you to get the most from your observation by encouraging you to take the lead, rather than just being a passive participant.

Preparation

- **Timing** - if you need to complete your observation for a formal assessment, ensure that you leave plenty of time to set up the observation, have a pre-meeting to brief your observer, a meeting for feedback and time to complete all the necessary paperwork. Observations can also give you really good material for job interviews.
- **Who will observe you?** - you may not have a choice, so ensure that if it's someone you don't know, meet them beforehand and ensure you're clear about the focus of the feedback. The more rapport you can build, the more comfortable you will feel.
- **What's the focus?** -- you will probably be observed under general headings such as: **planning, delivery, interaction with students, subject knowledge, tone and pace**, but do be pro-active: which specific aspects of teaching do you want to concentrate on? Avoid the temptation to do something really risky; ensure the observer sees you teach as you would normally.
- **What to tell students?** - this depends on whether the students will notice an extra person. It's not really an issue in a one-off lecture for 250; a different matter for a seminar of 12. It's up to you, but saying that 'X is looking at the range of teaching going on at the university; they are not assessing you' works well.

The Teaching Session

- **How to deal with nerves?** – preparation will settle most nerves. Get there early if possible. Generally, 5 minutes in, you will be oblivious of being watched.
- **What if the observer wants to get involved?** – agree this 'ground rule' before you meet. They may want to interact with students to double-check they understand the material, your explanation and the aims of the session.

Receiving feedback – as you know, there is a real skill in giving feedback; you give it to your own students all the time. The tendency for observers is to try and cover everything; sometimes there can be too much information without any sense of priorities. Be an active participant by:

- Recapping on the original focus of the observation as previously discussed.
- Get clarification of anything which feels general or vague.
- Avoid the temptation to respond immediately, especially if you don't agree.

What next?- a good observer will ask you to summarise what you've heard; an even better one will ask you to prioritise what you need to do next, and by when.

You will probably hear some really excellent feedback on aspects of your teaching you may have taken for granted. Attend to praise as much as you would to areas for development. You and your observer have invested a substantial amount of time, so make the most of your observation and the feedback you hear.



Summary

Although this ebook deals with varied aspects of teaching, there are some common themes:

- **You experience as a learner** can help you inform your own teaching. What worked for you as an undergraduate? What makes learning successful? And draw on all your experiences, not just those in the lecture theatre or classroom.
- **Filter your experience:** what worked for you may not work for the students you teach. Take time to understand what motivates them and what approaches to learning are most effective.
- **Play to your own strengths:** there are a million ways of being a great teacher. The quiet, clear, concise and listening tutor can be just as effective as the extrovert all-singing, all-dancing charismatic performer.
- **Get to know your students** if not individually, at least get a snapshot of who makes up your classes. And the more you know about what they already know, the more effective your teaching will be.
- **Students may not know how to learn:** they may be bright; they've made a free choice to join your course, so why aren't they always prepared to cover the work? The transition to HE is a huge step, and for many they have no role-models, or are in the UK for the first time. Take time to stress the benefits of learning at university.
- **Ask for help.** Life's too short, as is your working day. Avoid re-inventing the wheel. Get advice from those involved in learning support. Ask colleagues, make friends with your department administrators and get feedback from students. An honest 'critical friend' can save you hours.

Teaching is only one aspect of your work. The following questions could help you to prioritise what you could do next:

- What issues have these articles raised for you?
- What are your priorities now? Perhaps choose, say, 5.
- What do you want to do next?
- How will you move forward?
- Who can help you?
- What is your timescale?

About the author



Sean Russell is a freelance careers consultant, executive coach and outplacement consultant. He has worked in various university careers services, including the role of Director at Birmingham and Warwick. In addition to writing and editing careers articles, he has been a visiting lecturer at three universities variously in the departments of education and academic development.
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