

2. Thinking about your students

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2.1 First thoughts about your students

Think about your students ahead of your first meeting with them, either as the audience for a first lecture or as the members of a first class. Ask yourself what you know about them. Think about the lecture or class (or other event) and ask what you should know about them in order for the first lecture or class to be an effective one.

A table like this will help you to register and organise your thinking.

My students	
What I know about them	How can I use or respond to this
Hard Data <ul style="list-style-type: none">– likely number– likely age-distribution– previous experience in the institution	
What they will bring to the lecture or class <ul style="list-style-type: none">– previous educational experience in the institution or elsewhere– professional qualifications or experience– other experience	

Any likely barriers to learning – command of English – any other barriers that I can think of	
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Even a simple set of questions will help you to think hard about your students before you see them. In particular, the table (or one like it, and be ready to amend it to suit your purposes) will require you to make the effort to see your first encounter from their point of view. The question ‘What will they be bringing to the lecture or class?’ is always a good one to ask. It will remind you that each of your students will be bringing a personal collection of knowledge and experience. You may be able to use what they bring; in any case, you will have to have it in mind as you teach them.

Immediately after the first lecture or class, register what did happen. Your table will then record not only what you were thinking before the event but your subsequent account of the event. Your table will now be a record of your developing awareness. As you maintain what amounts to a log, you will develop a keener sense of the personal attributes that are characteristic of a particular group of students and that are relevant to their work on a course.

As always, the table is intended to be illustrative. Amend it to suit your needs.

2.2 The learning contract with your students

When you teach a new class or group, a set of understandings will begin to emerge about the way things are to be done, about what is expected of the student and the tutor, and so on. In that way, you and your students will be like any group beginning to work with each other. In one way or another, the way of doing things, the rules, that apply to you and your students will emerge. For instance, you and your students will come to an understanding about the submission and return of written work, or about the way that the class discussions are to run.

These rules, these understandings, will form the learning contract between you and your students and between the students themselves. The rules will constitute 'the way things are done' in your class.

As you prepare for your teaching, give time to thinking about the learning contract that you want to develop with your students. In the absence of an explicit discussion about these matters, the understandings will emerge as your students observe what you do. If you take telephone calls from your students at any time without demur, your response will signal your availability 'at any time'. More generally, your response to what goes on in the early encounters (the lectures, the seminars, the discussion-groups) will determine the rules that apply.

There is much to be said for an explicit discussion about these matters. In some cases, there will be a relevant institutional rule. In other instances, there may be a rule but it may allow some discretion. In any case, even when the rule exists and allows no discretion, such as 'We will treat each other with respect and will enable everyone to have an equal opportunity to learn', it may still be appropriate for you to bring the rule into a discussion so that you and your students can be reminded of the rule and of its implications for the way you go about your work.

Remember too that whilst you will have a contract, a set of understandings, with your class as a whole, you will also have an individual relationship with each member of your class. Each member will have a unique, personal set of traits, experiences and expectations. The challenge to the teacher is to come to know these individual differences and to respond to them. The larger the class, of course, the more difficult it will be, and the stronger the inclination to rely on the general understandings. But it is important not to overlook these individual relationships. There will be a learning contract not just with the group but with the individual members as well.

2.3 Supporting your students through the course

Your prime responsibility to your students is to help them to learn. That responsibility goes beyond each individual learning event or piece of assessed work and extends to the whole of the course that you are teaching. You cannot achieve that purpose

unless you know your students and maintain careful records of their progress. (In keeping records, you will need to be aware of the requirements of the Data Protection Act and of your institution's code of practice.)

Relating to your students

Overall, and within the bounds of a professional relationship, students will rightly expect you to be friendly, open, helpful and enthusiastic. That responsibility extends to making yourself available so that students may, within reason, contact you about their work on the course, at times that you will need to specify according to the mode of contact. Such contact need not necessarily be face-to-face – it may increasingly be electronic. In the latter case, expectations should be clear on both sides as to how quickly a reply will arrive.

Students' relationships with you and the course will reflect both their prior experience and the passage of time – from perhaps apprehensive newcomers, through a mid-course plateau and perhaps mid-course blues, to the frantic, anxious (although it need not be!) revision and exam period. You will need to think how best to reflect that changing relationship in both your teaching and your assessing.

Beginning

Think about your own experience as a learner. What would have helped you to make an effective start on your course? You would no doubt have expected your teacher to:

- put you at your ease;
- attend to introductions, depending on numbers and the history of the group;
- attend to 'housekeeping' matters;
- give you some pointers to what lies ahead and enthuse you;
- ease you into the subject at an appropriate level;
- indicate the style and nature of assessment, if appropriate at this stage;
- let you leave at the end of the event with a feeling that solid work has been achieved and that such will be the case in future.

Continuing

Once a pattern of relationships and a style of working have been established, you can expect more of a routine to follow. The pattern of your teaching events will focus much more on the final bullet point – content. It will help your students if they know in advance what to expect and you have planned your teaching series of events in advance, so that each event builds on what has gone before. As you will note from the techniques suggested in the *Teaching in action* cards (Section 4), you will help and support your students' learning if you take every opportunity to involve them actively in their own learning, even in a mass lecture. Such involvement may go a long way in overcoming mid-course blues, as will your enthusiasm.

Assessment

Assessment will come to occupy centre stage more in your students' consciousness as the course continues. Its purpose must be clear and it must be a reflection of and grounded in the work that has been undertaken and the stage the course has reached. Its prime purpose will be to encourage active learning by grappling with the course content and to act as a progress marker.

Your response to each piece of work must relate to and build on your response to a previous piece. Consider assessment not in terms of an individual, isolated piece of work, but as part of a continuing process whereby you monitor and review student progress throughout the course. Your response and style of commenting will reflect the stage of the course and the progress that a student has made, but it should always aim to support, encourage and build on what has gone before, to move the student on to a higher level of understanding. The card *Assessing your students' work* (4.6) goes into further detail.

Endings – and the examination

As the course moves towards the end, expect anxiety levels to rise as the prospect of examinations looms, particularly for new students. This will be a time for reviewing the work of the course, for highlighting important themes and for pulling the themes together. If you have planned effectively, such reviews should fall naturally out of what has gone before. You will have to decide whether it is appropriate to introduce

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practice examination questions, depending on the prior experience of the group and what other support is offered.

Supporting – a final word

Everything you do in your teaching must aim to support your students' learning. That support extends throughout the course and changes to reflect the progress both of the students and of the course.