

2. The fundamentals of effective teaching

What does it mean to be an effective teacher in higher education? To understand this, we must first have an understanding of how students learn. As Ramsden (2003) states:

Good teaching and good learning are linked through the students' experience of what we do. It follows that we cannot teach better unless we are able to see what we are doing from their point of view (p.84).

This section of the handbook examines the fundamental principles of effective teaching in higher education, and focuses on the central question: What type of teaching encourages effective learning?

Understanding student learning

One of the important theories that has come out of research into student learning over the past 25 years is the concept of 'approach to learning'. This concept refers to the way in which students go about learning, 'how they experience and organise the subject matter of a learning task; it is about what and how they learn, rather than how much they remember' (Ramsden, 2003,p.41).

In general, students can be said to adopt, depending on the task and situation, either a surface or deep approach to learning (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003). Students who take a surface approach to learning generally focus on the demands of the assessment tasks and completing only what is necessary for the task. They tend to focus on unrelated parts of a task and generally set out to memorise information. These students do not try to make connections between what they already know, what they are learning and the real world. Students who take a deep approach to learning on the other hand, set out to understand what they are learning. They relate what they already know about a subject or topic to new knowledge and can relate theoretical ideas to everyday reality. These students generally try to organise content and knowledge into a coherent whole while relating evidence and argument.

The approach students take to learning is dependent on numerous factors including the learning environment, students' motivation, individual preferences, the nature of the subject and discipline, the types of assessment tasks, teaching methods, and more. While teachers cannot be expected to influence all these factors, they can do much to encourage deep approaches to learning and discourage surface approaches.

What type of teaching encourages effective learning?

In *Improving the Quality of University Teaching*, Biggs and Tang (2007, p.25) list several ways teachers can encourage deep approaches to learning. These include:

- teaching in a way that makes the structure of the topic explicit;
- eliciting active responses from students;
- confronting and eradicating students' misconceptions;
- building on what students already know;
- emphasising depth of learning rather than coverage; and
- using teaching methods that support the aims and intended outcomes of the subject.

Strategies for encouraging active learning are examined in chapter 4 of this handbook.

Good teachers: What do students say?

From his research on the history of good teaching, Paul Axelrod lists common elements of good teaching that ‘transcend time, place, discipline and institutional type’. From students’ perspective, good teachers are characterised by: accessibility, fairness, open-mindedness, mastery and delivery of academic material, enthusiasm, and knowledge and inspiration conveyed (Axelrod, 2007).

These characteristics are consistent with what students tell us today about good teachers. Good teachers are generally people who are enthusiastic about the subject and who are able to make the material engaging by designing a variety of interesting and relevant learning activities and encouraging student interaction. In addition to being well-prepared and organised, good teachers are knowledgeable about the subject and the course in which they are teaching, and they are usually able to explain things clearly including what they expect students to do and achieve. Finally, good teachers are approachable and show respect for students’ ideas and efforts by acknowledging contributions made by students and by providing constructive and timely feedback on students’ work. As well, they show concern for the individual progress and development of their students.

Although no one would expect new teachers (or even experienced teachers) to display all these attributes, knowing what the research and students say about good teaching is useful in preparing to teach and in reflecting on our teaching. Teaching is a complex and challenging endeavour and effective teachers are those who constantly reflect on ways to improve their teaching. Chapter 8 of the handbook offers advice and strategies for reflecting on and evaluating your teaching.

Effective small groups

Cannon and Newble (2000) characterise effective small group as having three key elements: active participation, face-to-face contact and purposeful activity.

Active participation in small group settings refers to student involvement in learning. Small group teaching should allow participation and contribution from each student in the group. Although it is not always easy to determine whether a student is “actively participating” or not, – some students prefer to listen actively, rather than contribute to discussion – every student in the class should have the opportunity and encouragement to contribute to group discussions and activities.

Face-to-face contact is an important aspect of classroom interaction. For students to engage in discussion and classroom activities, they need to be able to see each other and you. This is where room layout and seating can be important. Communication involves both verbal and nonverbal communication skills and these are important skills to develop. Increasingly, students are also asked to communicate and interact with each other online and this requires quite different skills, but this is usually in addition to, not instead of, face-to-face interaction.

Purposeful activity means having a clear purpose and structure to the class. For example, if you are facilitating a discussion, you should be clear about the purpose and objectives of the exercise as well as the structure/organisation. More advice on planning and structuring classes is offered in the next section of this handbook.

In addition to these elements, a good small group is one where:

- The classroom environment is accepting and non-threatening;
- Learning is cooperative rather than competitive;
- The sessions and learning activities are enjoyable;
- The content is adequately covered;
- Leadership roles are equally distributed;
- Evaluation is accepted as an integral part of the learning process;
- Students are prepared for class;
- Students attend regularly; and
- All students participate actively (Cannon & Newble, 2000, p.43).