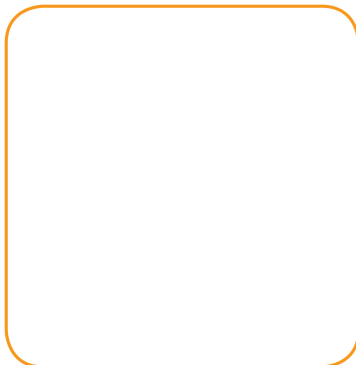


# The Melbourne Sessional Teachers' Handbook

Advice and Strategies for small group teaching at the University of Melbourne

*Second Edition*

**Chi Baik**



*Policy analysis, development and commentary*  
*| Academic development and expert advisory services |*  
*Educational leadership | World-class research and consultancy in the field of higher education |*  
*University teaching, learning and assessment | Institutional management |*  
*Internationalisation and globalisation |*  
*Research higher degrees |*  
*Higher education workshops and seminars*

The logo for the Centre for Student Health and Engagement (cshe), consisting of two overlapping white curved lines forming a stylized 'C' shape, with the lowercase letters 'cshe' to its right.

This guide was developed for the University of Melbourne by Dr Chi Baik of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, with contributions from Professor Richard James, Associate Professor Sophie Arkoudis and Ms Linda Corrin,

Permission is granted for copying, distribution and use by other institutions, with appropriate acknowledgement.

Available in electronic form from <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/>

© CSHE 2008, 2013.

ISBN 9780734039941

Further queries regarding permissions and availability:

Centre for the Study of Higher Education  
The University of Melbourne

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au>

## Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. The learning and teaching environment at the University of Melbourne .....</b>	<b>3</b>
The Melbourne Curriculum .....	3
The student experience and the role of sessional teachers .....	4
Small group teaching and learning settings.....	5
Cultural diversity .....	6
eLearning and online learning .....	7
<b>2. The fundamentals of effective teaching.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Understanding student learning.....	8
Good teachers: What do students say? .....	9
Effective small groups .....	9
<b>3. Getting started and planning to teach .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Getting started: A 7-point plan.....	11
Setting the scene: The first class.....	14
Using student names.....	16
Finding out what students know .....	17
Preparing for classes.....	18
<b>4. Strategies and skills for small group teaching .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Questioning skills.....	20
Facilitating small-group activities.....	22
Leading problem solving sessions.....	24
Facilitating student presentations .....	25
Conducting tutorials.....	26
Facilitating laboratories and practical classes .....	28
Dealing with difficult situations: FAQs .....	30
<b>5. Teaching international students.....</b>	<b>31</b>
Creating opportunities for small group participation .....	31
Supporting students in developing critical thinking skills .....	32
<b>6. Strategies for teachers new to Australian universities .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>7. Assessment and feedback .....</b>	<b>36</b>
Guidelines for assessing and grading written work .....	36
Giving feedback on written assignments .....	37
Trouble-shooting: FAQs on assessment and feedback.....	38
<b>8. Evaluating and improving your teaching.....</b>	<b>39</b>
Student feedback.....	39
Self-evaluation.....	40
Peer-evaluation .....	40
<b>9. Developing your teaching career .....</b>	<b>43</b>
Creating a teaching portfolio.....	43
Professional development opportunities.....	44
<b>10. Information and services for teachers at the University.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>References and useful resources.....</b>	<b>49</b>

## Introduction

This handbook has been prepared specifically for University of Melbourne teachers who are employed on a sessional, short term or casual basis. It provides a broad framework that can be used by sessional teachers to plan their teaching and to reflect on the role they play in supporting and influencing student learning. As well, it offers practical advice and strategies for the classroom.

Sessional teachers make up a large proportion of the teaching staff at the University of Melbourne and they contribute significantly to the quality of teaching and learning at the University. Sessional teachers not only play a role in students' academic progress but also have the opportunity to contribute to their overall satisfaction with life on campus.

Sessional teachers work in a variety of settings and are referred to by a range of titles including tutors, demonstrators, lecturers, clinical tutors, seminar leaders and teaching assistants. Although they vary widely in backgrounds, experiences, expectations and in the specific roles they take within departments and faculties, sessional teachers share a common place at the forefront of small group teaching at the University. This handbook therefore focuses on small group teaching settings and it draws on an earlier *Guide for Tutors and Demonstrators* developed by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (James & Baldwin, 1997).

The handbook is divided into ten chapters. The first eight chapters relate specifically to teaching and learning in the University, Chapter 9 provides advice on career development, and Chapter 10 lists the relevant policies and services available at the University. The last section of the handbook lists useful references and resources for further reading.

This handbook takes a 'whole-of-university' approach to teaching and learning and therefore does not attempt to cover the specific teaching settings or requirements in departments and faculties. Depending on a teacher's disciplinary background and personal approach to teaching, parts of this handbook may be more useful and relevant than others. Teachers should also refer to induction materials, handbooks or guides produced by their departments or faculties.

# 1. The learning and teaching environment at the University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne is an international university that aims to provide students with the highest standard of teaching and learning as well as a rich and diverse educational experience. The University's learning and teaching objectives are underpinned by *Nine Principles Guiding Teaching and Learning* ([http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/resources\\_teach/framework\\_teach/docs/9principles.pdf](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/resources_teach/framework_teach/docs/9principles.pdf)). These principles provide a framework for a first-class university teaching and learning environment.

If you are new to teaching at the University, it is important for you to find out about the broader educational context in which your students are learning. This section attempts to summarise this context by providing information on the Melbourne Curriculum, the graduate attributes and the main teaching and learning settings at the University.

## The Melbourne Curriculum

In 2008, the University introduced a landmark educational reform known as 'The Melbourne Model' and now referred to as 'The Melbourne Curriculum'. Under the Melbourne Curriculum, students undertake a broad undergraduate program known as a 'New Generation degree' followed by either a graduate professional degree, a research higher degree or employment.

The objective of these degrees is to provide students with an education that is defined by both depth and breadth – depth in the expertise gained by studying a program in a major discipline, and breadth from taking subjects outside students' main area of study. The aim is to have graduates who not only have expertise in their discipline, but who also understand the broader context and the wide range of situations in which they can apply their skills and knowledge.

The breadth component makes up at least 20 per cent of a student's program and comprises subjects undertaken outside the main fields of study in the student's degree, or specially designed interdisciplinary University Breadth Subjects (UBS) (See <https://breadth.unimelb.edu.au/breadth/info/index.html>).

## Graduate Attributes

The educational objectives of the Melbourne Curriculum are closely tied to the University's desired Graduate Attributes. The University's aim is to prepare exceptional graduates who have the characteristics, skills and types of knowledge necessary to excel in a complex global environment. Specifically, the University hopes that the Melbourne Experience will enable graduates to become:

- academically excellent;
- knowledgeable across disciplines;
- leaders in communities;
- attuned to cultural diversity; and
- active global citizens.

See <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/about/attributes.html> for more information on the graduate attributes.

## ***The Melbourne Curriculum – what does it mean for you?***

Sessional teachers play a critical role in helping students achieve the desired learning outcomes of the Melbourne Curriculum and creating an environment that is welcoming and conducive to learning.

The educational objectives of the Melbourne Curriculum make it particularly important for you to:

### **1) Get to know the students in your class**

Under the Melbourne Curriculum where at least 4 subjects in a student's course involves breadth studies, you will find that students in your class may have different motivations for taking the subject and hence different expectations of the subject and of you. Some students may be taking the subject as part of their core discipline and others may be taking it as part of their breadth component. It is therefore important for you to get to know your students and try to cater for the diversity in expectations.

### **2) Help students to see the broader context for what they are learning**

One of the key educational objectives of the Melbourne Curriculum is that students will be able to appreciate the broader context in which they can apply their skills and knowledge, and be able to apply these in a wide range of situations. This means helping students to explore such questions as:

- How is what we're learning relevant, or how can it be applied outside the university context?
- How does what we're learning relate to industry, professional careers, global issues etc?

### **3) Give students opportunities to develop important transferable skills**

The Melbourne Curriculum's emphasis on depth and breadth as well as the University's Graduate Attributes, requires a focus on skills development – problem solving, communication, critical thinking, teamwork and leadership. The small group setting is ideal for this as the teacher can encourage the development of these skills through discussion, group work, problem solving activities, debates and so on. Strategies for encouraging participation are covered in Chapter 4 of this handbook.

## **The student experience and the role of sessional teachers**

The majority of sessional teachers are involved in small group teaching of one form or another, and for many students, particularly undergraduates, sessional teachers are the personal face of the University. Sessional teachers therefore play an important role in contributing to the quality of teaching, learning and the student experience at the University.

The quality of teaching and learning in small group settings is especially important for first-year students who are making the transition from school to higher education. A large study on the first-year experience conducted by the University's Centre for the Study of Higher Education (Krause 2005), revealed that:

- almost one in four students believed they were not known to at least one staff member; and
- 19 per cent of students had 'thought seriously' about deferring or leaving (p. 9).

The study also revealed that the transition to university is even harder for international students and that they are 'significantly less likely' to feel like a member the university community (Krause, 2005, p.22). This is not surprising given that most of our international students are not only having to adjust to living in a different culture, but they are also having to do this while studying in a second or additional language.

These findings have particularly important implications for staff involved in small group teaching.

As a teacher in a small group setting, you can use classroom interaction and activities to help students adapt to life at university and feel a part of the university community. You can do this by:

- creating a classroom atmosphere that is welcoming, friendly and non-threatening;
- encouraging students to get to know their classmates and develop friendships – this is particularly important for international students who are adjusting to new cultural and social experiences;
- getting to know your students and addressing them by name;
- showing a concern for the individual progress of students and giving them individual feedback on their work and progress; and
- being aware of the various university student services (see Chapter 10 in the handbook) and referring students who are experiencing personal difficulties to an appropriate student service.

In sum, sessional teachers play a crucial role in creating an environment that is welcoming and conducive to student learning. This means promoting an intellectually challenging and stimulating environment where all students are encouraged to participate actively in the learning process. You are also well placed to support and show concern for the individual development of students, as well as to give timely feedback on their progress and achievement.

### **Small group teaching and learning settings**

Much of the teaching and learning at the University takes place in small group settings of one form or another. These include (but are not limited to):

- tutorials;
- laboratory settings (e.g. science-based labs; language labs, computer labs);
- seminars;
- workshops (e.g. model making, creative writing, academic or professional skills);
- design studios;
- clinical teaching; and
- ensemble playing.

Although the size of the classes (usually ranging from 5-30 students) and the type of teaching that occurs in each of these settings may vary greatly, the benefits are common to all.

### ***Benefits of small group learning***

There are numerous benefits of small group learning. Small group settings such as tutorials and practical classes provide a chance for students to:

- discuss and analyse core texts;
- develop and test their own ideas;
- reinforce and clarify material presented in lectures;
- develop important practical skills and techniques;
- apply general concepts to issues and problems;
- receive individual assistance and guidance;
- receive immediate feedback on questions; and
- develop and practice important skills such as communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork as well as practical skills and techniques.

Learning in small group settings introduces undergraduates to the University's academic culture, particularly the culture of questioning, critical thinking and discussion. These settings are also important in fostering

social interaction among students and helping them form social networks and adjust to university life.

The quality of learning and the student experience in small group settings are influenced greatly by the skills and attitudes of the teacher. In general, effective small group teachers are those who:

- facilitate effective relationships in the group;
- encourage active involvement from students;
- engage students in a variety of activities;
- challenge students by asking probing questions and encouraging critical thinking; and
- demonstrate flexibility in their attitudes and teaching.

The role of teachers in small group settings is thus complex and challenging but can also be extremely rewarding. Chapters 3 and 4 of this handbook provide advice and practical strategies for enhancing small group teaching and learning.

## **Cultural diversity**

Cultural diversity at the University encompasses differences based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, value and belief systems, disability, class, sexuality, gender, age and educational background. This diversity enriches the University community and encourages innovative teaching and learning practices that are relevant in the global academic environment.

The University is committed to fostering an institutional culture in which cultural diversity in values and outlook is appreciated. This means creating an environment where we promote culturally inclusive behaviour and activities, ensure cultural differences are heard and explored, and actively seek to learn from other cultures. The University's *Cultural Diversity Policy* and website provide guidelines for staff and offer practical ideas for supporting cultural diversity in the classroom.

The five operating principles endorsed by the University's Academic Board, highlight the importance of:

- respecting culturally diverse approaches to learning and ways of understanding;
- providing opportunities for all students to reflect on, and express their own sources of cultural influence, as well as the knowledge and experience they bring to the educational environment;
- encouraging a critical and open awareness of inappropriately ethnocentric, gender-biased language and assumptions and devising effective strategies for managing classroom situations of discrimination and stereotyping;
- creating an open and inclusive approach to learning from others, and valuing the diversity of perspectives offered in group learning contexts; and
- maintaining a learning environment that addresses the marginalisation or isolation of students on the basis of cultural difference (<https://equity.unimelb.edu.au>).

The Cultural Diversity website also offers strategies and resources for inclusive teaching practices that include improving the learning experience of students from different countries, cultures and educational experience, as well as improving the quality of teaching and support for students with disabilities. See <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/diversity/supporting/teaching.html>.

Chapter 5 of the handbook examines strategies for teaching international students from diverse backgrounds, and chapter 6 offers advice for teachers who were born and educated overseas.



## **eLearning and online learning**

The use of information and communication technologies is an important feature of teaching and learning at the University, and the University strives to be at the forefront of the development and use of educational technologies.

The use of technology in higher education is spoken about in many ways: eLearning, online learning, blended learning, flexible learning etc. At the University of Melbourne a broad distinction is made between “eLearning” and “online learning”:

*eLearning* refers to the use of digital technologies predominantly to support and supplement students ‘campus’ based, face-to-face learning. The Learning Management System, the lecture-capture system, as well as other technologies and tools are commonly used in this area.

*Online learning* refers to the use of digital technologies for the wholly online delivery of University subjects either for free (ie. through a MOOC) or as part of a degree program. Some subjects offered online may also be supported by intensive face-to-face residential schools or workshops.

There are numerous benefits of eLearning and online learning for both students and teachers. They provide opportunities for students to interact with each other and learning resources outside of the classroom. They can encourage independent learning and the development of important communication skills that are valued in the workplace. As well, eLearning and online learning enables teachers to engage students in new and innovative ways.

The extent to which you will be using technology in your teaching will depend on the objectives and requirements of your course. If you are not familiar with the types of educational technologies used at the University, it may be useful for you to visit the Learning Environments website (<http://le.unimelb.edu.au/elearning/>).

### ***The Learning Management System (LMS)***

The University uses a centrally supported Learning Management System or LMS to assist students in their studies. The LMS allows teachers and students to use a variety of online tools such as discussion boards, email, blogs, wikis and more. Most of your students will be using the LMS and it is likely that you will be using one or more of the LMS tools in your teaching, so take time to become familiar with the various functions and tools, or enrol in an LMS training session.

Detailed guides on using the LMS tools are available on the Learning Environments Website (<http://www.lms.unimelb.edu.au/teaching/>).

## 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/organization. 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 student participate actively (Cannon & Newble, 2000,p.43).

### **3. Getting started and planning to teach**

If you are new to teaching, you are probably feeling nervous about the first class, particularly about what you are going to do and how students are going to respond to you. Sessional teachers often report feeling anxious about 'not knowing enough' or not being able to answer students' questions. This section offers advice on getting started, conducting the first session and preparing for classes.

#### **Getting started: A 7-point plan**

##### **1. Meet your sessional staff coordinator and clarify the terms of your employment, your rights and your responsibilities**

Your sessional staff coordinator may be the course coordinator, a lecturer, head tutor or a designated professional staff member in your department. This is the person you will go to if you have questions about your employment. Make sure that you understand your duties and what the department/faculty expect from you before you start teaching. Also, clarify the activities that are part of your paid employment. If you are a tutor, will you be required to attend lectures or staff meetings? Will you be involved in grading assignments? Are you expected to be available for individual student consultations outside of the classroom etc.?

Your department will probably provide you with a reference guide or handbook that outlines what is expected of you and the limits to your responsibilities. Read this carefully and ask your coordinator any questions that remain. Being clear about your roles and responsibilities, as well as what you can expect from the department or faculty, will help you feel more prepared and confident about teaching.

See the checklist for getting started provided at the end of this section.

##### **2. Participate in an induction/orientation program**

Many departments and faculties conduct pre-semester induction or orientation sessions. These normally provide information about administrative matters, details about your department/faculty's expectations, and some useful advice on teaching in small groups. Some departments also run 'debriefing' sessions during the semester. These provide an opportunity for teachers to share their experiences, discuss what is working well and receive advice on any issues or difficult situations.

The induction session and the follow-up meetings are invaluable for new teachers, so try your best to attend the sessions run by your department.

##### **3. Know the aims and objectives of the course and subjects you are teaching**

Whether you are a tutor, demonstrator or other small group facilitator, you should be familiar with the aims and objectives of the subjects in which you are teaching as well as 'where you fit' in the course as a whole. You should also ensure that students are familiar with, and understand, the stated aims and objectives of the subject.

##### **4. Familiarise yourself with relevant buildings, facilities and resources**

If you attended an induction session, you will most likely have received information about the facilities and resources available to you. You should know for example, where the staffroom is and where/how you can access photocopiers, telephones, computers and printers. If your teaching requires use of technology or AV equipment, ensure that you are familiar with the equipment and you know the contact details of the IT support technicians. There is nothing more unsettling for a new teacher than equipment failure in the first session.

## **5. Be aware of relevant university and faculty/departmental policies and procedures**

The university has clear policies on most matters relating to teaching and learning at the university including policies on academic misconduct (academic honesty and plagiarism), cultural diversity, equal opportunity and so on (see chapter 10 of this handbook). As well, your department or faculty will have specific policies on matters such as assessment and grading, special consideration and class attendance. While it is not necessary for you to know the details of all these policies, you should know the types of policies that exist and where to access them if required.

## **6. Know where to go for support or assistance**

If you are new to teaching, you will benefit from ongoing support and guidance on various aspects of your teaching. The sessional staff coordinator in your department or faculty is usually the person who will be able to support you and provide advice on various matters related to your work. One of the things the coordinator will probably do is alert you to upcoming events such as faculty teaching and learning seminars, or seminars run by the CSHE. It can also be very useful to discuss ideas and concerns about teaching with colleagues and fellow teachers (also see Chapter 8 on improving your teaching).

In addition, take note of the numerous services for staff and students at the university. Being aware of these will enable you to help students who are experiencing difficulties by referring them to appropriate student services. Chapter 10 of this handbook provides a list of support services for teachers and students.

## **7. Plan your first session carefully**

Most new teachers are nervous about the first session, so it helps to plan carefully what you are going to do and how. The importance of the first session should not be underestimated. It is when students form their first impression of you and when you set the tone for how the group will work during the semester. If you make a positive impression by appearing friendly, welcoming and highly organised, then you will have made a great start to the teaching semester and you will probably find that you feel more at ease and confident about your teaching.

### ***Getting Started: A checklist for sessional teachers***

Before you commence teaching, ensure that you have addressed the following points. Being clear about these questions will help you to feel prepared for your role and will enable you to focus more of your attention on teaching and student learning.

- Have you submitted all the necessary employment forms to your coordinator?
- Are you clear about your roles and responsibilities? Are you expected to:
  - attend lectures?
  - participate in departmental or faculty staff meetings?
  - be available for student consultation outside scheduled class times?
  - assess and grade students' assignments and/or mark exam papers?
- Are you clear about your contact hours and the payment you will receive for such activities as: attending lectures or staff meetings, assessing and grading student work, marking exam papers?
- If your department or faculty has a handbook for sessional teachers, do you have a copy?
- Have you participated in an induction or orientation session?
- Are you familiar with the teaching spaces that you will be using?
- Do you have a university email account?
- Do you know where and how to access relevant facilities and resources including:
  - work spaces for sessional teachers
  - staff room including coffee & tea-making facilities
  - printers, photocopiers and fax machine
  - stationary cupboards
  - pigeon holes
  - subject coordinators' offices
  - student work areas including computer labs
- Do you have contact details for IT support staff?
- Have you introduced yourself to the front desk and reception staff?
- Do you know how to access relevant policies and guidelines that may affect you such as the PPP, intellectual property, harassment, OHS etc.?
- Have you undergone training to use necessary University systems such as the LMS and Themis?

## **Setting the scene: The first class**

As mentioned above, it is essential that you plan carefully for the first session so that you make a good first impression and set the scene for the rest of semester. If you are planning to use the equipment in the room, make sure you arrive early to check that everything is working and so that you have time to call for technical assistance if necessary. Arriving early for the first (and subsequent) classes also means that you have time to arrange the furniture if you can, to suit your planned activities.

Although there is no 'formula' to a successful first class – as this will depend largely on the specific context of your subjects – generally, you should aim to do some or all of the following:

- Introduce yourself, and start to learn students' names;
- Do a 'getting-to-know-you' or ice-breaker activity;
- Clarify roles and expectations (and set ground-rules);
- Give an overview of the subject including the objectives, assessment tasks, topics etc.; and
- Clarify administrative arrangements including your availability outside class time.

## ***Introductions***

It is important in the first session to spend time introducing yourself and helping students to get to know each other. You can create a friendly, welcoming environment from the start by conveying your enthusiasm and telling students something about yourself: What's your background and interest in the subject? How did you come to be teaching in the subject? etc. Remember to write your name and email address on the board and let students know if/when you are available for student consultations.

A good way for your students to meet each other and for you to set the tone for a relaxed, fun and interactive class is to facilitate a short icebreaker activity. It is also an important first step in learning students' names. A few ideas for icebreaker activities are provided on the next page.



## ***Ideas for Ice-breaker activities***

The type of ice-breaker activity you decide to do will depend on how much time you have in the first session, the age/ year-level of your students, and the type of activity you feel comfortable to facilitate. Here are a number of ideas for icebreaker activities and an indication of how long the activity would take in a small class of approximately 18-20 students.

### ***Individual***

#### **1) Self-introductions (5-10mins)**

Go around the room and ask students to introduce themselves and tell the class:

- their name
- a bit about themselves – e.g. their background, their course etc.
- the main reason why they are taking the subject

#### **2) What's in a name? (10-15mins)**

This is similar to the activity above except students are asked to explain what their name means and/or the story behind their name – i.e. what do they know about how they got their name?

This activity is useful in helping you (and members of the class) start to learn students' names.

### ***Pairs***

#### **3) Introducing a classmate (pairs) (10-15mins)**

Divide the class into pairs. Tell students they have 5mins to find out 3 pieces of information about their partner. Then ask the students to introduce their partner to the whole class.

#### **4) Back to the future (pairs) (15-20mins)**

Ask students to think about where they will be in 10 years time. Divide the class in pairs and ask them to interview each other. What are their partners doing 10 years from now? Then ask the students to introduce their partner (in the future) to the whole class - e.g. *"This is Sam. She is a CEO of a large pharmaceutical company etc."*

### ***Groups***

#### **5) What do we have in common? (15-20mins)**

Divide the class into groups of 4-6. Set a time limit (at least 5mins) for the group to make a list of five things they have in common. Point out that the list cannot include obvious facts like "we're all doing this subject" or "we're all students at the University of Melbourne" etc.

After the set time, ask a spokesperson from each group to report to the whole class.

#### **6) Where do I belong? (15-20mins including 5mins preparation)**

This activity is very useful for mixing the students around, but it requires some preparation.

- Before the class, choose 4 groups/categories of things that are loosely related (e.g. Asian cities, European cities, North American cities, African cities) and write 5 words belonging to these groups on slips of paper or post-it notes -- e.g. Seoul, Manila, Phnom Penh, Pyongyang, Ulaanbaatar (for Asian cities); Lisbon, Warsaw, Sofia, Nuuk, Minsk (for European cities) and so on.  
There should only be one word on each piece of paper or post-it note (you should end up with 20 words).
- As students walk into the classroom, hand them a slip of paper or post-it note and ask them to figure out which group they are in (but don't tell them what the categories are). This will require students to walk around, talk to other students and work out which group they belong to. After they have found their groups, ask them to introduce themselves and tell each other something about their background.
- After 5-10 minutes, ask for a spokesperson from each group to introduce the group members to the whole class.

## Using student names

*'I was really surprised because the tutor knew all our names and she asked us to answer questions...It made me really alert and I couldn't slack off, but I suppose it was good that she took the effort to get to know us.'*  
(2<sup>nd</sup> year Property and Construction student)

Getting to know student names is a useful first step in building rapport with the students in your class. Students, particularly first-year students, appreciate when their university teachers know them by name. It shows that the teacher is interested in his/her students and concerned about their individual progress. Addressing students by name is also a useful tool that you can use to manage and influence classroom dynamics. For example, it allows you to include students in group discussion – e.g. *'What do you think about this Brian?'* – and it also allows you to acknowledge students' contributions and clarify or emphasise key points – e.g. *'As Julie said earlier...'*; *'Ying raised a really good point about...etc.'*

Although learning (and remembering) names is not an easy task, particularly if you teach a few different classes, it is not impossible if you work hard at it. For example, one experienced tutor in the Faculty of Business and Economics spends a couple of minutes at the beginning of each class for the first few weeks, learning her students' names and encouraging them to learn each other's names. In the third or fourth week, she offers a small prize to the student who can correctly identify all his/her classmates by name.

Some teachers ask students to use name tags (sticky labels) or place cards (A4 paper folded in half) for the first few weeks; some draw maps of the room layout with students' names next to where they usually sit (although this can change); and some teachers try to learn names from the photographs provided with the class list. There are numerous methods of learning and remembering names and while it may take you a few weeks or more to remember all your students' names, it sends a strong message to students about your attention and concern for their learning.

## **Expectations, requirements and ground rules**

It is a good idea to spend a few minutes in the first session talking about your role and expectations of the class and to introduce some 'ground rules'. This does not mean laying down rules in an authoritarian way, but rather talking with students about how the class can be most effective, what you expect from them and also what they can expect of you. Some examples of things you might talk about are:

- the importance of preparation for classes;
- respect for classmates' views and backgrounds;
- importance of active participation and 'having a go' – i.e. it's OK to get it wrong; and
- importance of turning off (and keeping off) mobile phones.

In addition to these, it is useful to provide a brief overview to:

- the nature of the subject – *What is it about? What are the aims and objectives, the theoretical foundations, assumptions etc?*
- your own interests in the subject – *Why are you enthusiastic/passionate about the subject?*
- assessment tasks and procedures – *How will students be assessed?*

It is a good idea to cover these points briefly at this stage so you don't spend too much time doing all the talking. You may want to revisit some of the points in subsequent classes. Try to involve students as much as possible from the first session and encourage them to ask questions about the class or raise issues or concerns.

The amount of time you spend on clarifying expectations and setting ground-rules will depend on the requirements of your department and subject. In some departments the whole first session is devoted to introductions and administrative matters. Other departments prefer that students begin working on the course material and content.

### **Finding out what students know**

As mentioned in Chapter Two of this handbook, one of the fundamental principles of effective teaching is that it builds on students' existing knowledge. It is very important, therefore, to find out what your students bring to the course. This is particularly important at this university with its richly diverse student population. Students will most likely come to your subject with very different expectations and educational experiences.

How can you ascertain students' existing knowledge and skills in the subject area? There are several ways you can do this. If there are prerequisites for the course, then you will already know a little about what the students have learned, but it can still be useful to hear about their prior experience in the subject area. Some teachers ask students to write a couple of paragraphs about their experience and interest in the subject or they set a topic related to the discipline for students to write about.

One of the benefits of asking students to do a short written piece or to give a brief talk about their experience in the discipline, is that it allows you to diagnose potential gaps in students' skills or knowledge and then suggest some form of intensive 'catch-up' work for them. In particular, if you notice that a student has poor written or oral communication skills, then you can refer them to an appropriate student service such as the Academic Skills Unit (ASU) or faculty-based Teaching and Learning Unit.

Another suggestion is to distribute short 'profile' forms and analyse these after the session. An example of a student profile form is shown below.

<b>Example: Student profile</b>
Name: _____
First language: _____
1. What course are you doing at the University of Melbourne? _____
2. Why did you choose this particular subject? _____
3. What is your experience in/with... (e.g. Baroque Music)? _____
4. Complete this sentence: What I most want to do in this subject is _____

## **Preparing for classes**

### ***Knowing your subject***

When preparing for classes, it is a good idea to check your understanding of the concepts or problems covered in the sessions, perhaps by revisiting past notes or textbooks. If you are leading a tutorial or practical class with set questions/problems, it is important to work out all the problems yourself and take down a few notes. Do this even if you have been provided with solutions to the problems as this will help you to explain more clearly what the questions require and the process involved in solving the problems.

One of the common concerns of new teachers is that they will not know all the answers to students' questions. While it is very important for you to know a good deal about the subject you are teaching – and you probably want to appear knowledgeable – you are not expected to know everything. Students generally appreciate teachers who are candid about not knowing the answers to difficult student questions. When faced with a difficult question, acknowledge the student who asked the question and let him/her know that you will try to address it in the next class. If the question is not relevant to the subject, offer to discuss the questions outside of class or refer the student to a relevant text that deals with the topic.

While it is important for you to look over the content of the session in preparing for classes, it is just as important to plan how you are going to run the class - e.g. How will you help students achieve the learning objectives for the particular session? What skills are involved in this? etc. A checklist for planning a session is provided on the following page.

### ***Questions to ask in planning a session***

1. What do you want students to learn in this class/session?
  - What are your objectives for this particular session?
  - How does this fit in the overall structure of the course? How does it relate to last week's session?
  - If your class is a tutorial or practical class, how does it relate to the material covered in lectures?
  - What skills do you want students to practise/develop (e.g. oral communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking etc.)?
  
2. How will you organize and facilitate the session?
  - What are the key priorities for the class? –i.e. what will you spend most time on?
  - Will you spend time reviewing concepts/problems introduced in lectures or last week's session?
  - What kind of activities will you ask students to do? Roughly how long should students spend on these?
  - Are the activities sufficiently varied to maintain interest?
  - What “back-up” activities/problems will you have in case something you've planned doesn't work well?
  
3. How will you know whether (and how well) students have met the objectives for the session?
  - What kinds of questions could you pose to check their understanding of key concepts?
  - How can you (quickly) check what they learnt from the class activities?
  
4. What teaching resources will you need? Do you need to rearrange the furniture in the room for you planned activities?
  
5. How will you conclude the session?
  - Will you spend time reviewing key points from the session?
  - Will there be time to invite final questions from students?
  - What preparation/homework will you ask students to do for next week's session?

## 4. Strategies and skills for small group teaching

As discussed in previous chapters, the main aim of small-group teaching settings is to engage students and encourage them to participate actively in the learning process. This section of the handbook offers several strategies for encouraging active student participation.

### Questioning skills

#### *Why ask questions?*

Questioning is a vital facilitation skill for teachers, and it is a useful strategy for encouraging active learning. A good questioning technique will allow you to:

- arouse students' interest in a topic or issue;
- assess the level of students' existing knowledge;
- check students' understanding of concepts and theories;
- assist students to review and make links to previous classes;
- prompt discussion and debate;
- develop students' communication skills;
- challenge students to defend their positions and refine their argument;
- stimulate creative and critical thinking;
- involve all students actively in learning; and
- clarify and confirm what students have said.

Becoming skilled at using questions comes with considerable practice and experience. You can start to improve your skills in this area by planning and preparing the types of questions you will ask during the class. There are several factors to consider in using questions effectively:

#### **1) Use a range of questions pitched at an appropriate level**

The type of questions you ask will depend on the purpose for asking them. Broadly speaking, there are two types of questions: closed questions and open questions.

**Closed questions** - e.g. *Did the author explain the limitations of his methodology? Did profits increase or decrease?* These questions require a one-word answer – either 'yes' or 'no', or a choice between alternatives that you offer. While teachers are generally advised to limit their use of closed questions – as these kinds of questions do not encourage extended responses from students – they can be useful as a way of giving students a hint or starting point, especially if students are struggling to answer an open question.

**Open questions** – e.g. *What did the author say about his methodology? Why did the venture fail?* These types of questions invite a more detailed response and encourage deeper levels of thinking and understanding.

Often when students do not respond to a teacher's questions, this is because the question is not pitched at an appropriate level or it is too general and vague. Try to vary the types and level of questions you use to encourage participation from students with different capabilities.

A useful guide to the different levels of questions is Bloom's Taxonomy of the cognitive domain:

- **Knowledge** –e.g. Who were the key composers of the Baroque period? What does *ceteris paribus* mean in Economics?
- **Comprehension** – e.g. What's another way of saying this? How would you explain this?
- **Application** – e.g. How would this apply in a construction site? How could you apply this theory in your work?
- **Analysis** – e.g. What factors contributed to this problem? Why did the company's strategy fail?
- **Synthesis** – e.g. How do all these ideas relate? What conclusions can we draw from these various perspectives?
- **Evaluation** –e.g. Based on the company's stated goals, how effective has the marketing campaign been?

It is often a good idea to build the complexity of questions gradually. In other words, start with a straightforward, simple question and then build on students' responses to ask more complex questions that require analysis or synthesis and critical thinking. For example:

*What two issues does Lee raise in her article?*  
↓  
*Why are these problematic?*  
↓  
*How do these relate to the ethical issues raised by Anderson?*  
↓  
*How effectively has she argued her case?*

## 2) Allow time for students to respond

It is important to give students time to think about and process the questions you ask. One of the common mistakes made by inexperienced teachers is not allowing enough 'wait time' after asking a question. This often results in the teacher answering his/her own question or abandoning the question and moving on to the next one.

Remember to give students enough time – at least a few seconds – to respond to your questions. In other words, do not be afraid of short silences. If you do not get a response the first time, ask the question again or ask it in a different way. You can also give students a minute or two to think about a question – e.g. *I'm going to give you a minute to think about this question and then I'm going to ask for some responses.*

## 3) Respond appropriately to answers

Teachers play an important role in creating an environment in which students feel comfortable to answer questions, contribute to class discussion and ask questions themselves. One way to do this is to give positive feedback consistently to students who answer questions or contribute to the discussion (e.g. *'well done'*, *'very good point'*, *'yes'*, *'that's right'* etc.). This kind of immediate feedback encourages student participation and the 'risk-taking' involved in volunteering answers and comments.

It is also important to respond appropriately to students who offer an incorrect or inappropriate response. If part of the student's response is adequate, acknowledge this before pointing out where the gaps or mistakes are – e.g. *'You're on the right track, but have you thought of ...?'*. Another approach is to ask students to explain their point or give examples – e.g. *'Can you explain what you mean by ...'*, or *'Can you explain how you worked that out?'* This will help you to clarify specific gaps in the student's response. Also, invite contributions from other students - e.g. *'Did anyone take a different approach?'*, *'Does anyone have a different view?'* etc.

Students can feel embarrassed or discouraged when they have offered incorrect answers so remember to be encouraging and perhaps remind them that the material is designed to be challenging.

### **Facilitating small-group activities**

Facilitating small group activities in class can be a useful way to encourage active participation by all students. Breaking up the class into smaller groups of 3-5 students or pairs allows students – particularly those who are more reticent and reluctant to speak in larger groups – to articulate their views or compare their responses to questions in a smaller, non-threatening group. This allows students to learn from their peers and to develop important generic skills such as communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork. More importantly however, small-group activities provide students with opportunities to interact with and learn from their peers. This is widely acknowledged as being an important factor in student engagement: ‘the more frequently students interact with peers in the learning community in educationally purposeful ways, the more likely they are to engage with their learning’ (Krause, 2005, p.25).

A few techniques for facilitating small-group activities in class are provided on the following page.



## **Techniques for facilitating group work in class**

Here are a few examples of the kinds of small group activities you can facilitate in class. There are numerous useful resources that provide many more ideas and suggestions for small group activities. Some of these are listed in the last section of this handbook (*References and useful resources*).

### **Buzz groups**

Students form small groups of 3 or 4 to work on a set question or problem.

Buzz groups can be used in small group teaching settings to :

- review course material – e.g. 3 minutes at the beginning of class to list 3 main points from the lecture or last week's class
- compare answers to questions - e.g. 5-10 minutes to compare answers to problem solving activities or tutorial exercises
- brainstorm and share ideas on a particular question, issue or problem
- solve a specific problem or complete an exercise

When facilitating buzz groups, it is useful to give students an indication of the time they have to do the activity and the way in which you want them to report back – e.g. 'a *spokesperson from each group to give a 2 minute report*' or 'two points from each group' etc. Doing this will help students focus on the task at hand.

It is also useful when you have a set of questions to cover in the session, to allocate a specific question/s to each group. You can then ask students from each group to present their response to the rest of the class.

### **Pyramid discussion**

As the name suggests, this technique involves building up the number of students in the group from one to the whole class. This technique is particularly useful for discussing a 'big' or contentious issue, solving a complex problem, or when the objective of the activity is negotiating to reach consensus. Pyramid discussions work as follows:

- 1** Students are given a few minutes to think about the question/problem individually and to jot down a few notes.
- 1+1=2** Students form pairs and share their ideas, reach a consensus or work on the problem at hand.
- 2+2=4** After a short period of time (at least 10 minutes), pairs join to form groups of four. Again, the aim is to share ideas, solve the problem or reach consensus
- 4+4=8** Then, a group of four students joins another group of four to make a group of eight and continue the discussion. Depending on the time you have, you may prefer to skip this step.
- All** Finally, you facilitate a whole class discussion on the topic/issue noting the main points.

### **Jigsaw activity**

This technique is particularly useful for discussing case studies involving various perspectives, solving a problem with different parts, or when there are a number of set readings to discuss in class. The group size will depend on the number of parts or tasks in the activity. Here is an example of how the jigsaw technique works when you have 3 articles or case studies to discuss:

1. The three texts (A, B, C) are distributed to the class so that a third of the students have text A, a third have text B and a third have text C. Ask students to read the text individually either at home as preparation for next week or, if the text is very short, give students 5 minutes to read during class.
2. Students who have read text A form groups of 3-4 to discuss the main points or questions concerning the text; those who have read text B form groups with other text B students and the same with students who have read text C.
3. After 10-15mins, students are asked to form groups of 3 so that each different text is represented in the group. In other words, each group should consist of a student who read text A, a student who read text B and a student who read text C. Then each student takes turns to explain the main points from the text they read.

If you have time, it can be useful to conclude the activity by bringing the whole class together to review the main points/issues.

## Leading problem solving sessions

In a number of disciplines, small group teaching involves working on a set of problems that have usually been set by the subject coordinator or lecturer and distributed to students before the class. These classes can pose several challenges for the teacher, especially when students come to class expecting to get all the solutions to the problem. In this situation, it can be easy for teachers to fall into the pattern of going through all the set questions on the board while students busily copy the answers. This is particularly the case when there is a large number of set questions and teachers feel there is not enough time for peer-interaction and group work.

Another common concern of teachers in these settings is knowing where to 'pitch' the lesson when half the students have attempted the problems before coming to class and the other half haven't. What can you do to encourage more active involvement from students in problem solving sessions? Here are a few suggestions:

- 1) From the first session, make it clear to students that you will be running the classes on the assumption that students will have attempted the problems before coming to class. Emphasise that the sessions will be more valuable for students (especially in preparing for exams) if they prepare beforehand.
- 2) Avoid the temptation to do all the work yourself. Go through the problems together and elicit responses by asking a series of questions rather than doing all the explaining yourself –e.g. *'In order to calculate the exact percentage gain or loss what do we have to do?.... OK, how do we calculate the percentage gain or loss if the yield increases by 25 basis points?'* etc.
- 3) Even if it is clear that most of the students have not prepared for the class, ensure that they are doing more than just 'getting the answers'. One suggestion is to say something like *'Ok, I can see that most of you have not done your tute work so I'll give you 5 minutes to quickly attempt question one'*. While students are working on the problem, those students who have prepared the questions can form groups and compare their answers/approach. Doing this will ensure that both groups of students are involved and working in class.
- 4) Vary the way you go through the set of problems. For example, give students 5 minutes to work in pairs to compare their answers to a question before going through the answer yourself. Then when you go through the answers with the whole class, students will be more ready and willing to contribute. Another suggestion is to allocate questions to students in pairs or small groups and ask them to explain the answer or write their calculations on the board or on overhead transparency (which you have provided). While they are doing this, you can go around and monitor their progress – this will help you to check individual students' understanding and assist if they are struggling.

If it seems like there are too many problems to cover in the session, prioritise and focus on the problems that are worth exploring, or ask students which problem caused them the most difficulty and start with this one. It is much better to cover a few problems in depth and help students to consolidate their understanding, than to go through a long list of problems at a superficial level. If you are concerned that you should be addressing all the set problems, then perhaps you could prepare solution sheets for the more straightforward questions and distribute these at the end of class or put them on the LMS after the class. Before you do this however, remember to speak to your subject coordinator—he/she may have different expectations or suggest other strategies for leading the problem solving session.

## Facilitating student presentations

In many small-group teaching settings, students are required to give a presentation or a seminar paper. While this ensures the active participation of the student presenting, it often leads to a 'flat' classroom atmosphere where the presenter is reading from prepared notes and the audience is sitting quietly looking disengaged. How can you facilitate student presentations to encourage active listening and stimulate discussion? The following suggestions may be helpful.

- Provide guidance on giving oral presentations. Have a class discussion on what constitutes a good presentation. For example, talk about the importance of:
  - stating the purpose/aim of the presentation;
  - having a clear and logical structure;
  - engaging with the audience through appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication – e.g. speaking clearly, maintaining eye contact, etc.;
  - using notes appropriately – i.e. not reading word for word;
  - having good quality visuals (if the student is planning to use visual aids); and
  - keeping to the time limit.
- Give students a time limit for their presentations and for follow-up questions and discussion. Let them know how you will be handling this – i.e. Will you be signaling when there is one minute left? Will you ask students to pose questions at the end? etc.
- Ask presenters to include a question for the class or a short activity (if appropriate) during the presentation.
- Give the audience specific tasks to do while listening to the presentation – e.g. '*think of three discussion questions*'; '*list three points that were new or relevant to you.*' etc. You can then ask for the audience's contribution after the presentation.
- Design a short peer-feedback form for the students in the audience to complete during the presentation. For example, the form might consist of three open-ended questions:
  - What did the presenter do well?
  - How could the presentation have been improved?
  - What was the most interesting part of the presentation for you?

At the end of the presentation, these forms can be collected and given to the presenter as peer feedback.

## Conducting tutorials

The type of tutorial you run will depend largely on the subject you are teaching and your discipline. Some tutorials involve discussion around lecture and reading material, some tutorials involve students working through a set of problems, and some tutorials are a mixture of both. Regardless of the type of tutorial you are running, the overall aim should be the same – that is, to promote active learning through questioning, activity and critical reflection. The tutorial is also the place for you to help students practise and develop important transferable skills such as critical thinking, oral communication and teamwork.

In his book, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Ramsden (2003, p.149) lists common problems with tutorials:

- The tutor gives a lecture rather than conducting a dialogue.
- The tutor talks too much.
- Students cannot be encouraged to talk except with difficulty; they will not talk to each other, but only respond to questions from the tutor.
- Students do not prepare for the sessions.
- One student dominates the discussions.
- The students want to be given the solutions to problems rather than discussing them.

This can be summarised in one sentence: 'A poor tutorial is one where the students are inactive' (Biggs, 2003). How can you ensure that you set up an environment that is conducive to active student learning and participation? The following section provides 12 tips for you to consider as you plan to conduct tutorials.

### **12 tips for conducting tutorials**

#### **1. Plan the structure and organization of the tutorial, but be prepared to be flexible.**

Students appreciate a structured and organised session, but experienced teachers know the importance of being flexible. One of the advantages of small group teaching is that you can respond immediately to students' questions and needs. This may mean abandoning your plan for the class and focussing on a particularly difficult topic/issue.

#### **2. Spend a few minutes (at the start of class) clarifying points from last session and making links to the lecture.**

One of the main functions of a tutorial is to complement the lecture. Students like to know the connection between lectures, tutorials and their readings, and they see the tutorial as the place to clarify concepts and theories presented in lectures.

It is therefore a good idea to spend time at the beginning of the tutorial to review the last session and/or lecture and make links with the tutorial. Try to involve students as much as possible in this and avoid giving another 'mini-lecture'. For example, you could ask a couple of review questions focussing on the main (or complex) points introduced in the lecture, or you could give students a few minutes (perhaps in pairs) to list key points from lecture. Another suggestion is to invite students to ask questions from the lecture – e.g. 'Today we're going to look at X. Before we start, what questions do you have from this week's lecture?' If students do not respond, you can ask a couple of review questions and try to elicit responses.

#### **3. Make a clear statement of the purpose of the tutorial and give a brief overview of what you will be covering in the session.**

Do this even if you are just going to be following the set tutorial questions. An overview is useful for students as it provides a structure for the tutorial and it means that they know what to expect. If you are going through a set of problem-solving questions, a useful strategy is to list the questions on the side of the whiteboard and tick them off as you complete them – this will help you and the students keep track.

#### **4. Avoid trying to cover too much.**

Prioritise and spend most time on the important concepts, ideas or problems. One of the common mistakes made by inexperienced tutors is trying to cover too much in the tutorial. If students come to class expecting you to give them all the answers, remind them that this is not the main purpose of tutorials and use the strategies offered in this handbook to encourage active participation.

#### **5. Use a range of purposeful activities.**

Activities should have a purpose and an aim, and it can be useful to make these explicit to students. Try to use a range of activities to suit your objectives and the skills you want students to develop. If every class consists of the same kind of discussion activity, this can become predictable and less interesting for students. In planning your activities, also think about the room layout, and if possible, move the furniture to suit your planned activities.

#### **6. Monitor participation of all students (and try to include the 'quieter' ones).**

To do this well, you need to know all your students and be able to use their names. Rather than starting off with a whole-class discussion, perhaps ask students to work in pairs or small groups and call on different students to report back to the class. Throughout the session, invite students to ask questions and contribute to discussion. Also, remember to give immediate positive feedback to students who contribute to class discussion or volunteer answers to questions.

#### **7. Use the whiteboard or overhead projector to build up a summary of main points from the session.**

Doing this is useful for students, particularly ESL (English as a second language) students, as it enables them to have a visual representation of points raised in discussion. Also, having the main points on the board helps students to focus on the key points and differentiate them from the less important or less relevant points raised in the discussion.

#### **8. Use relevant examples to illustrate key points and issues.**

Think of examples that students can relate to and help them to connect what they are learning to the world outside the university context. Also, invite students to contribute their examples from their own experience or readings.

#### **9. Pay attention to your communication skills.**

This includes both verbal and nonverbal communications skills and refers to such things as pace, timing, eye contact, gestures and facial expression. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this handbook, one of the key characteristics of a good teacher is the ability to explain ideas/concepts clearly.

#### **10. Repeat and rephrase key points.**

Students generally need repetition to reinforce learning and while you do not want to repeat yourself too much, it is a good teaching strategy to repeat or rephrase the key points, especially when you are explaining difficult concepts.

#### **11. Spend a few minutes before the end of the session to sum up the main points.**

This is a critical part of the class as it allows students to consolidate their learning and to clarify any questions remaining. Invite final questions or check students' understanding by asking one or two review questions of what you've covered in the session.

#### **12. Help students prepare for the next tutorial.**

Do this by telling students what you will be focussing on next week and by giving them one or two key questions to think about as they read the set texts or prepare the tutorial questions. If the tutorial requires students to read a number of articles, then perhaps you could allocate particular readings to students and facilitate a jigsaw activity in the next tutorial.

## **Facilitating laboratories and practical classes**

*Taken from James and Baldwin (1997)*

Preparing for a practical class is much the same as getting ready to tutor, but there are some specific issues to bear in mind. Clearly you must be thoroughly familiar with the procedures that students will follow and the learning objectives of the session.

In the first instance, you must ensure that you can smoothly guide students through the set tasks in the available time. Give some thought to the sequence of events and the likely time that each stage will take - this will help you to keep students focused. Learn to spot possible blockages and warn students of them, for even tried-and-true experiments might have steps that students find difficult to understand or execute. Ensure that you are totally confident about explaining equipment usage. This may mean testing equipment beforehand to check that you are able to explain the key features quickly, clearly and without any fumbling around. Watch out for any areas in which there are risks and point these out to students.

A major part of the demonstrator's role is to engage students with the theory and the assumptions that are relevant to each exercise. To prepare for this, give some thought to how you will introduce the session, if this is your role. In particular, think about how you can make connections with previous activities or the associated lecture series. It is also a good idea to think about the type of probing questions that you can ask students during the session to prompt their thinking and to help them explore the principles underlying the tasks for the day. There is more advice on your role as 'questioner' elsewhere in the handbook.

### ***The role of the demonstrator***

What is the role of the demonstrator? Some people don't consider demonstrating to be teaching, but it most surely is. Unfortunately, the term 'demonstrator' is misleading because it tends to conjure up images of someone who shows students certain techniques and methods, which students presumably later replicate. Certainly, demonstrators are expected to explain techniques with which students may not be familiar (if only for expediency's sake), and it is usually necessary to instruct students in the operation of laboratory equipment if students are using it for the first time. But the role of demonstrator hardly ends there. In fact, effective demonstrators play many roles in the laboratory, and the opportunities this form of teaching provides for one-to-one interaction or discussion in small groups make for rewarding experiences.

One of the other myths about demonstrating is that it is a less intensive task than tutoring. This is not the case. It is important to see the role of demonstrator in active terms - don't imagine that you will be able to stand back and play trouble-shooter while students work more or less autonomously. You may well be able to do this, but this is not the role for which you are employed. Your role is to teach - to make contact one-to-one with all students each session, to probe student understanding, to be intellectually provocative, and so on. Effective demonstrators have a great deal of get-up-and-go, and are a friendly thorn in the students' side.

### **Demonstrator roles**

- **Questioner** - Perhaps the most significant role of demonstrators is to probe student understanding of theoretical and conceptual principles. Laboratory exercises should not be conducted mechanically without an eye for the central principle. In the main part, the demonstrator's role is to remind students of the intent of the exercise and to invite them to make connections to the bigger picture. This means employing a comprehensive questioning technique.
- **Expert consultant** - Students also need answers and clear direction. Students may need someone to turn to if they are unsure about procedural steps, uncertain about what they are expected to observe or record, or unclear about the objectives of the learning experience. The demonstrator needs to be on hand and willing to offer expert, authoritative advice and commentary.
- **Salvage agent** - Occasionally (or maybe even regularly) things will go awry. Equipment does not always perform as expected, experiments may not turn up what was anticipated, and mishaps can occur. Treat these serendipities as opportunities for learning! Bear in mind, and stress to students, that the learning outcomes for a practical class are more to do with the process than an end product.
- **Time manager** - Time is precious in many laboratory classes and students must work to a tight schedule. Even though students have responsibilities for their own time management, demonstrators probably should play a role too. This means keeping an eye on the progress of individuals and groups, and identifying and heading off potential blockage points in the procedures.
- **Professional model** - It is easy to overlook the fact that students see you as a role model. Your attitude towards inquiry, the reporting of findings, your behaviour in the lab, all send messages about the standards of the scientific method and what it is to be a professional in your discipline.
- **Person of responsibility** - Don't forget that in most labs there are health and safety considerations. You need to be familiar with procedures for an emergency and for the reporting of accidents. Take note of the location of fire extinguishers, fire blankets, safety showers and other safety equipment. You may need to be the first to act in an accident or emergency. As a precaution, remind students of hazards in any procedure they are undertaking, and point out the safety features of the laboratory.

(James and Baldwin, 1997)

#### ***A three-point questioning technique for labs and practical classes***

- 1) Procedural questions that ensure student endeavours are focused:
  - For how long will you heat this?
  - What should be the concentration of the salt solution?
- 2) Prompting questions, encouraging student engagement:
  - Have you thought about...?
  - Are you remembering to look for...?
- 3) Probing questions, to explore student understanding:
  - What do you predict will occur?
  - What would you expect to happen if...?
  - How would you design an experiment to...?

## **Dealing with difficult situations: FAQs**

***I ask a range of questions in every class but students don't respond so I end up answering my own questions and doing most of the talking. What else can I do?***

When students do not respond to questions, a common response by teachers is to give up on asking questions and revert to mini-lecturing mode. Avoid the temptation to do this and try to persevere with questioning. Some teachers call on individual students to answer questions when they don't get a response from the whole class. Although this can be a useful strategy if you know the students quite well, it can also have the unintended effect of making some students feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. A much better strategy would be to repeat or rephrase questions that you ask to the whole group and wait for responses. If after a short time, you still get no responses, then give students a couple of minutes to think about the questions – e.g. *'This is a tricky question so I'm going to give you one minute to think about it, perhaps talk to the person next to you and then I'm going to ask for responses.'*

If students are generally not responsive to your questions, you may have to think about the type of question you are asking: Are you starting with a question that is too complex or difficult? Would it be useful to give a hint or start with a more simple, straightforward question and build the complexity of questions from there?

***Every time we have a class discussion, the same couple of students dominate. How can I ensure that the quieter students have an opportunity to contribute?***

This is where small-group activities or pair work can be useful as they give all students the opportunity to interact with peers and contribute to the discussion. If you find that the same couple of students dominate small group discussion, then think about getting the groups to assign roles. For example, you could ask groups to choose someone to take notes and a spokesperson to report back, emphasising that they should choose 'someone we haven't heard from before'.

Knowing students' names can also help you manage the situation – e.g. *'Thanks Ben, can we hear from someone who we haven't heard from today? What do you think about it Susan. Do you agree with Li?'* etc. Of course you need to do this tactfully and take care not to make individual students feel uncomfortable by singling them out, but keep in mind that when used appropriately, names can be a very powerful tool for managing classroom dynamics.

***One of my students is quite rude and disruptive and I feel that it's creating some tension in the class. How can I resolve this?***

There are no foolproof strategies for dealing with disruptive behaviour as this will depend largely on your classroom management style and confidence to deal with the problem, as well as the nature of the disruptive behaviour the student is displaying. Behaviour that constitutes sexism, racism or bullying cannot be tolerated and you need to speak to the student immediately (outside of class), informing him/her that the behaviour is unacceptable at the University. You can refer the student to the various university policies that deal with discrimination (see Chapter 10 of this handbook). If the behaviour continues, seek advice from your subject coordinator or sessional staff coordinator.

Remember that the students in your class look to you for leadership so you need to handle difficult situations with confidence and maturity. This means not showing your frustration or annoyance and avoiding direct confrontations with students if possible. If a student is constantly disagreeing with you or trying to undermine your leadership of the class, and you have tried the subtle strategies mentioned in this section of the handbook, then ask to speak to the student outside of class. Be honest with the student about the effect of his/her behaviour on the class and give him/her the opportunity to voice any grievances he/she may have. Try to adopt a gentle, collegial tone and avoid blaming or accusing the student of bad behaviour. If the classroom atmosphere does not improve in the next week or so, consider talking to the whole class and revisiting the discussion on roles/expectations. Also, seek advice and support from your coordinator.



## 5. Teaching international students

International students account for approximately 25 per cent of the total student population at the University and they come from more than 100 countries including South Korea, Botswana, Canada, Nepal, and Germany. For the majority of these students, English is a second or additional language.

This section offers advice and strategies for teaching international students and is taken from a larger guide, *Teaching International Students*, developed by Sophie Arkoudis (2006).

### Creating opportunities for small group participation

It has been widely observed that international students may appear hesitant in contributing to group discussions. This is not necessarily because this is their preferred learning style. International students often report that they would like to participate but lack the confidence to do so. This could be in part due to their lack of familiarity with how to contribute to an academic discussion or their perceived lack of English language skills. Contributing to discussions can be seen as a risky undertaking if the students are not comfortable with their English language ability or are unfamiliar with the cultural conventions for 'breaking into' the conversation. Academics may need to create 'safe' learning environments where students feel that they can make a contribution. Creating opportunities for participation in class where students feel supported can be achieved by incorporating some of the following strategies:

#### ***Preparation for small group discussion***

- As second language learners of English, students need to be given adequate time to prepare responses. One strategy that can be used is to ask students to prepare some responses for the next tutorial or seminar. Set key questions with the reading material so that students can prepare their answer before the class. This will give them greater confidence in contributing to any discussion.
- It is important to make expectations about student participation clear to international students. As we know, this is an effective strategy for all students, but it is particularly useful for international students because research indicates that they are often not aware of what participation in class actually means in an Australian tertiary context. Making academic expectations clear can help to clarify this to students.
- Create a teaching atmosphere early in the semester in which students interact with each other. This allows the opportunity for international and domestic students to talk and get to know each other.

#### ***Encouraging contributions in class***

- We know that one way of increasing participation is to memorise students' names and invite them to speak. This can be a successful strategy if the lecturer has already established a 'safe environment' and if the international students feel that the group values their contributions.
- Ask international students how the issue would be considered from their experiences, keeping in mind that they do not represent the views of their culture or country.
- Briefly summarise the discussion from time to time, highlighting the key points, so that the students can follow the discussion.
- Pose questions or issues that students can discuss in pairs and then report back to the class.
- Remember to wait before moving on to another student, as it can take time for international students to understand the question, consider their response and communicate that in English.

- Structure group tasks so that international and domestic students are grouped together. Assign roles for each member of the small group, including discussion leader, timekeeper, note-taker, and person to report back. This allows everyone to have a role in the group.
- As is acknowledged in strategies for effective small group teaching, quizzes and pair work encourage interaction among students.
- Organise group activities so that diversity of experience and knowledge are necessary for successfully completing the task.
- Where possible, develop tasks that increase opportunities for domestic and international students to interact.

## **Supporting students in developing critical thinking skills**

*(Taken from Arkoudis, 2006)*

It is often suggested that students from Confucian heritage cultures find it difficult to think critically. However, like most stereotypes, this is unlikely to be true. Research has found that students from CHC are capable of high-level critical thinking (Biggs, 2003). It is not the international students' cognitive skills that are in question but their English language ability that influences their reading, understanding, interpretation and evaluation of the material that is demonstrated in either written or oral expression. As we know, developing critical thinking skills is equally challenging for domestic students.

Teaching critical thinking skills can be useful in assisting students to develop learning strategies to avoid plagiarism. Classroom activities that model critical thinking skills in our discussions, create learning opportunities for students to develop their skills and offer feedback can guide students' development of critical thinking skills. These may include:

- Explain and demonstrate what critical thinking skills are required in your disciplinary area. Different disciplines define it in slightly different ways.
- Clearly the reading process can be difficult for students who have English as a second language. It may be useful to highlight the importance of the reading material to the content of the course. This will assist students to access the main ideas presented in the text.
- When setting required reading, offer questions for students to guide their reading of the text. Stage the questions to include literal meaning (describe, define, explain), interpretive meaning (analyse, test, calculate, apply, demonstrate) and applied meaning (evaluate, compare assess). This will help the students to think beyond the literal understanding and develop their skills as strategic and critical readers.
- Develop students' critical thinking skills through classroom discussions. Questions such as 'In what situations would this work?' 'Can you think of any situation in which this would not apply?' "How does this relate to other theories/concepts we have discussed?" can be used as prompts for students to present different points of view.

## **6. Strategies for teachers new to Australian universities**

The University of Melbourne attracts high-quality academics from all over the world, and it recognises and values the knowledge and skills brought to the University by teachers who may have been born and educated overseas. The diversity in the University's teaching staff contributes to the rich and varied educational experiences of our students, and enhances the intellectual and social environment of the university.

This section of the handbook aims to provide some practical strategies and advice for teachers born and educated overseas. In particular, it aims to answer some questions that are frequently asked by overseas-born teachers who are new to teaching in Australia.

### ***Getting Started***

If you are an overseas-born and -educated teacher, the experience you had as a university student is likely to be very different to the experience of your students in Australia. Chapters 1 and 2 of this handbook provide information on the learning and teaching context at the University. The advice offered is relevant for all teachers, but particularly important for teachers who are new to Australian tertiary education and who may not be familiar with the educational context in which their students are learning.

You may find that the learning styles of students in Australia are quite different to the styles with which you are familiar. Whilst there are always individual differences in learning styles and preferences, generally speaking, students who have completed their secondary education in Australia are used to learning in an interactive classroom where there is discussion, group work and numerous opportunities to ask questions. Debate and questioning are also considered important for developing critical thinking skills, so it is not uncommon for students to disagree with and question their teachers.

Many overseas-born teachers comment that the classroom environment in Australia is far more relaxed and informal than in the countries where they were educated. This is particularly true of small group teaching contexts where the teacher is often seen as a peer and colleague rather than 'an expert' who imparts knowledge from the front of the classroom.

In addition, Australian universities including the University of Melbourne, generally aim to encourage an independent approach to study where students ultimately take responsibility for their learning. This means that most small-group teachers see themselves as people who guide student inquiry and learning rather than instructors who provide all the answers.

### ***The first session***

In addition to the advice in chapter 3 of this handbook, some additional suggestions for the first session are offered below.

Make sure you take time to introduce yourself to the class. While in some cultures it may be impolite for students to address their teachers by the first name, in Australia, it is very common for students to call their teachers by their first name. This is particularly the case in small group teaching settings where the interaction between teachers and students is usually informal and friendly. Many small group teachers are considered more like peers and colleagues rather than "experts" or "figures of authority."

Write your name on the board and let students know how they should address you. If you have a very long first name, perhaps you could suggest a shorter version for students – e.g. *'My name is Trinanthakorn, but*

*you can call me Tri.* Likewise, if you are unsure about the pronunciation of a student's name, ask the student how to say his/her name or what he/she likes to be called.

Also, spend a few minutes telling the students about your background, where you are from or where you were educated, and say something about your interest and experience in the subject. Doing this will help you to build rapport with the class and create a more relaxed and friendly classroom atmosphere.

Remember that you will have students from diverse backgrounds in your class and one of the challenges for you will be catering for this diversity. Take note of the advice offered in Chapters 3 and 4 of this handbook and make your expectations clear to all students. Be honest with your students about your role, your expectations and your limitations – students do not expect you to know or tell them everything, but they do appreciate teachers who are open and genuinely interested in their learning.

### ***Communicating in English***

Some overseas-born teachers for whom English is a second (or additional) language are nervous about teaching in English, and even highly experienced teachers can feel a lack of confidence because of their English language skills. While it is true that students can feel frustrated if their teacher – regardless of his/her linguistic background – does not communicate clearly, it is important to remember that clear communication is not just about perfect pronunciation of words or using flawless grammar. Rather, clear communication is about being able to present information in “chunks” or small sections that students can understand. Teachers who communicate clearly are those who are able to emphasize key words, use pauses appropriately, and who have good nonverbal communication skills – e.g. gestures, eye contact, facial expression etc.

If English is not your first language and you feel nervous or unconfident about teaching in English, there are numerous strategies you can use to help you communicate clearly.

- Try not to speak too quickly. When teachers are nervous, it is quite common for them to speak faster, rather than slower. This only makes it harder for students to follow your speech. Remember that it may take time for students to get used to your particular way of speaking, so slow down, emphasize key words in sentences, and pause after making an important point.
- Prepare questions and activities for each class. While it is important for all teachers to prepare for each class, it is especially important for those who are less confident about their communication skills. There are several things you may like to prepare:
  - a. *Questions to ask students* – Even if you are given a series of set questions/problems to cover in the tutorial or practical class, it is a good idea to prepare a few additional questions that you can use to help students understand the key concepts, review main points from previous classes, and/or to check their understanding of the material. Going into each class with prepared questions will also help you to feel more confident about using questions as a technique to facilitate discussion and student interaction.
  - b. *Key words* – If there are any key words that you are not sure how to pronounce, ask a colleague to help you, or use an online English pronunciation tool such as <http://www.howjsay.com/>
  - c. *Main activities* – If you are planning to set a small group activity or discussion, prepare the instructions on an OHP or write the instructions on the board. This will help avoid any confusion about what the task is and it will help to keep students focussed on the task.

- Use visual aids such as the whiteboard or overhead projector to provide an outline for the session or to list key words. Doing this will help students know what to expect in the class. If you have a number of questions, topics or tasks to cover in the session, it is a good idea to write an outline of the session on the whiteboard and mark off each item as you cover it. This will help students to follow what you are doing in class.
- Remember to leave time at the end to summarise the main points or 'take home message' and to invite any final questions. It may also be a good idea to prepare a short summary slide (OHP) with the key points to review with students at the end
- Be open and honest with students. Ask them to tell you if they do not understand what you are saying or if they want you to repeat a point. Likewise, if you are having trouble understanding what students are saying, ask them to repeat questions or points.

If, after a few weeks of teaching, you are still having difficulties communicating with the class, or if the feedback from students indicates that they are not understanding your speech, then seek help from either your coordinator or from the University's services. The University's Academic Skills Unit has an ESL speech specialist who works with both students and staff for whom English is a second or additional language.

## 7. Assessment and feedback

Assessment and feedback are crucial to student learning. Students are generally very focussed on formal assessment and this can affect their approach to learning and their behaviour. While it is uncommon for sessional teachers to be wholly responsible for designing assessment tasks, you will most likely be involved in assessing and grading student work as well as in giving students feedback.

This section of the handbook provides general advice on assessing students' written work and giving feedback. For a more comprehensive examination of assessment of student learning, see the *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities* Website at: <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/index.html>

### Guidelines for assessing and grading written work

The following are general guidelines for 'good practice' in assessing students' written assignments.

#### 1. Familiarise yourself with the assessment policy in your department.

There are disciplinary differences in the ways learning is assessed at the University. Some departments require tutors to grade students' work, some require double-marking or blind-marking, some invite external examiners, and so on. It is therefore essential for you to be familiar with the assessment policy in your department, especially in regards to late submission, plagiarism and re-submission of unsatisfactory work.

#### 2. Clarify the assessment criteria with your subject coordinator

Your subject coordinator may have a grading scheme with marks allocated for different sections of the assessment task, or you may be asked to follow more broad criteria. Either way, it is important for you to be clear about how you are going to grade students' work. What are the characteristics of an assignment that should receive a grade of H1, H2A, H2B and so on? Will marks be allocated for writing style and accuracy – e.g. expression, grammar, spelling etc? Will assessment be norm-referenced – that is, will the students' work be compared and rank-ordered so that there is a normal distribution ('bell curve') of grades across the class?

#### 3. Spend time in class explaining the assessment requirements and criteria.

It is a good idea to spend time in class explaining the aim/purpose of the assessment tasks and making your expectations explicit. What are you looking for? How will the assignments be assessed? What are your tips for getting started? etc.

#### 4. Remind students about the importance of acknowledging sources and avoiding plagiarism

If you are teaching first-year students, spend time in class explaining the issue of plagiarism and the importance of acknowledging sources: What is plagiarism? How can it be avoided? What referencing style are students expected to use? If students are unsure about plagiarism and how to acknowledge sources appropriately, refer them to the Academic Skills Unit or to the University's Academic Interactive Resources portal (AIRport): <http://airport.unimelb.edu.au/>

#### 5. Try to be fair and unbiased in your grading

This can be difficult when you teach a small class and you know the students whose work you are assessing. You may be influenced for example, by students' participation in class discussion or their performance in past exams or assignments. This is why some departments require assignments to be double-marked or blind-marked. If you are grading your own students' work, assess their performance for that particular assignment only and try to apply the same criteria and grading standards to the work of all students in the class.

## 6. Ensure that you maintain a consistent grading standard.

As you read more students' assignments, you may find that your ideas or judgments change, or you may find that the standards you applied for the first few assignments are different from the standards you apply to the others. It is therefore a good idea when you are assessing and marking your students' work, to stop from time to time and check that you are maintaining consistency in your standards.

## 7. Consult with your subject coordinator or colleagues to check that you are grading at an appropriate level.

This is particularly important if you are teaching a subject for the first time and the assessment requires considerable subjectivity. If there are a number of teachers involved in marking an assignment, the subject coordinator will normally arrange a moderation meeting to ensure that all the assessors are grading at an appropriate level.

## 8. Provide feedback to the subject coordinator on the overall quality of student assignments and any concerns.

The quality of student assignments can be a valuable source of information and feedback about what and how students have learnt, as well as areas they need to develop. All this information is useful in evaluating the subject and informing changes/improvements for the future.

## 9. Provide clear and specific written feedback to students

The issue of feedback is discussed in the next section.

## Giving feedback on written assignments

Feedback is essential to student learning and progress. Although this section focuses on feedback associated with formal written assessment, it is important to remember that informal feedback given during class is just as important to student learning. This kind of feedback encourages student participation and helps to build students' confidence. Feedback thus has a powerful influence on student motivation.

When giving feedback on students' written work, try to adopt the 'sandwich' approach:

- Start with positive feedback – *What did the student do well? What's good about the assignment? Why was it good – i.e. What should the student continue doing for future assignments?*
- Give constructive criticism – *What areas need improvement? In which areas did the student's work fall down? How can the student improve?*
- End on a positive/encouraging note.

In general, your feedback should be:

**Clear and specific** – If you are telling the student that his/her work was excellent, specify what exactly was very good and why. When offering constructive criticism, be specific about which areas were weak and give suggestions as to how the work could be improved. If the student's work is very poor or unsatisfactory, then suggest that he/she arrange to meet with you outside of class so that you can give more detailed feedback and suggestions on how the student can improve for next time.

**Honest** (but not discouraging) **and objective** – This is easier to do when students have performed well and you are giving positive feedback. It is just as important however, to be honest when giving feedback to students who have performed badly and to let them know the areas where he/she performed particularly poorly. Be objective, offer constructive criticism and avoid emotive language and sarcasm. Remind students that assessment tasks are part of the learning process and be explicit about how the student can improve for next time.

**Timely** – Try to return assignments to students within a couple of weeks of receiving them. This is particularly important if the period between assignments is quite short, as students need time to learn from the feedback and incorporate your suggestions in the next assessment task

### ***Giving feedback to the whole class***

In addition to providing written feedback to individual students, it is a good idea to talk to the whole class about your overall impression of their work. What was generally done well by students? What was particularly pleasing? What were some common mistakes made, or what did students generally struggle to do? How can students improve for next time?

If a number of students performed poorly or missed the main point of the assessment task, then it can be useful to provide a couple of model responses and ask students (perhaps in small groups) to analyse these briefly against the criteria.

## **Trouble-shooting: FAQs on assessment and feedback**

### **1. I suspect that a few students have plagiarised sections of their work. How should I respond?**

The university has a clear policy on Academic Honesty and its general approach to plagiarism is an educative one. If a student has plagiarised a part or all of his/her work, speak to your subject coordinator. Your department may have a policy regarding first and repeat offences.

There are many reasons why students plagiarise and these are often related to a lack of understanding about how to acknowledge sources appropriately. The best thing for a teacher to do is to help student avoid plagiarism by talking about it before the assignment is due. There are numerous self-help resources designed to help students understand what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. An example is the University's Academic Interactive Resources portal (AIRport): <http://airport.unimelb.edu.au/>. This site has a variety of interactive online exercises on various study-related topics including plagiarism and referencing.

### **2. A student is upset about the mark he received and thinks that I was unfair. What should I do?**

The University attracts high-achieving students who may be disappointed when they do not receive the grade they expected (or the grade they are used to getting). After handing back the assignments, it is important to talk to the class about your overall impressions of the assignment – i.e. What did students generally do well? What areas could have been done better etc.? If you are teaching first-year students, it is also a good idea to explain again, how the grading system works. If one or two students are particularly upset about their mark, give them individual feedback and explain clearly the reasons for their grade and how their work could have been improved. In some departments, students can have the option to have their assignment re-marked by another assessor. Again, your subject coordinator is the best person to speak to if the student persists.



## 8. Evaluating and improving your teaching

Reflecting on your teaching and obtaining feedback are essential in improving your teaching skills. Effective teachers constantly evaluate their teaching and consider ways in which they can improve as teachers. This section discusses three types of feedback or evaluation methods that you can use to reflect on and improve your teaching.

### Student feedback

Feedback comes in various forms, both formal and informal. Formal university student experience surveys (SES) are conducted for each subject every semester. The aim of the survey is to obtain students' feedback on the quality of teaching and learning that took place in their subjects. Many departments also conduct their own subject evaluations in addition to the University's. Whether sessional teachers are evaluated using one of these formal tools depends largely on the policy and practice of particular faculties and/or departments.

Although formal evaluation tools – which are typically used in the last week of semester – can be useful in helping teachers think about how they can improve their teaching in the future, they are not the only (or most useful) way to get feedback on your teaching. During class, teachers should constantly be getting informal feedback from students by monitoring their level of engagement and participation and by 'reading' their body language. Do students look bored or disengaged? Do they look confused? Good teachers are able to adapt and adjust their teaching in response to nonverbal cues.

Some teachers routinely ask students for feedback on particular topics or activities: Which topics were difficult? What did they think about a particular activity? While most students will generally tell you if a topic is too difficult or if there was not enough time to complete an activity, they may be reluctant to tell you what they *really* think about the class or your teaching. One useful way to obtain feedback from all the students is to ask them to jot down their thoughts (anonymously) on a piece of paper. Getting this feedback after a few weeks of semester means that you will have time to address students' concerns and make changes to your teaching for the rest of semester. An example of a simple four-item feedback form is shown below.

#### Example: Mid-semester student feedback form

Reflecting on the first few weeks of the course, please answer the following questions.

1. What do you like most about these classes so far (i.e. What has been helpful to your learning in the subject)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What do you like least? (i.e. what has hindered your learning in the subject?)  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. If you could change one thing about the classes, what would it be?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Other comments  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Thanks for your feedback*

After reading the students' comments, it is important to acknowledge their feedback in the following class. Let them know how you will respond to their suggestions – What can/will you change? What can't be changed and why?

Finally, remember that you can learn a great deal about your teaching by looking at the quality of students' work. If the majority of students produce poor quality work, you may have to think about the types of learning activities you are setting in class and how you can better assist students to achieve the learning objectives of the course. It may also mean giving feedback to the subject coordinator if he/she is mainly responsible for developing the activities and assessment tasks.

## **Self-evaluation**

Effective teachers are those who continuously reflect on their classes and consider how to improve their teaching and the learning experience of students. If you are new to teaching or if you are teaching in an unfamiliar context, you may find a formal approach to self-evaluation useful. Use the questions in the self-evaluation checklists developed by James and Baldwin (1997) to guide teachers' reflection and self-evaluation (see following page). They advise that the questions may not be of equal relevance to teachers and that 'no teacher can hold all of these elements together simultaneously'.

Depending on your specific teaching context and style, you may find that you are stronger on questions to do with rapport building and communication, but less strong on questions to do with structure and organization, or vice versa. The checklists should be used only as a tool for identifying your strengths and weaknesses.

## **Peer-evaluation**

Some faculties and departments have a structured system for peer observation. This normally consists of a staff member from the teaching and learning unit observing your class and giving you written and/or verbal feedback. You can also ask one of your peers informally, to observe your class and give you feedback.

Before the scheduled observation, try to arrange a brief meeting with the teacher to confirm the time and place of your class and give him/her some context/information about the session. It is useful for the person observing to know for example, what the topic of the class is and how it fits in the course – i.e. Are you starting a new topic or continuing from last week etc.? It is also useful for the observing teacher to know what your objectives are for the class and the particular areas of your teaching on which you want feedback.

You can also learn a great deal about your own teaching by observing a colleague's class. You can arrange to do peer observations with another sessional teacher or you can ask an experienced teacher in your department whether he/she would mind if you observed his/her class. Ask your sessional staff coordinator to recommend a teacher for you to observe.

The Collegial Feedback on Teaching guide for sessional staff coordinators includes detailed advice for teachers conducting peer-observations as well as guidelines on giving feedback to peers. You can access the guide on the CSHE website at [http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/resources\\_teach/feedback/](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/resources_teach/feedback/)

## **Questions for self-evaluation of small group teaching**

### **Overall**

- What were the most and least successful aspects of the class? What would I do differently if I were leading this session again? Was it well planned? Did the plan work? If not, why not? And, if not, was I able to respond and adapt quickly and flexibly?

### **Organization/structure**

- How well did I introduce the session and link it to previous classes and to the lecture program?
- Did the group cover the essential concepts and issues? If not, how will I ensure that these are covered subsequently? Did I try to deal with too much?

### **Student participation and interaction**

- Did all students participate in the discussion and/or activities? If not, why not? If not, how can I reorganise activities to encourage this in the next class?
- How would I describe the group dynamics? Are there any problems in the students' interactions with each other that need to be addressed?
- Were there any indications that some students have special learning needs? If so, how can I help them and what resources can I draw upon in doing so?
- Were all the students interested, engaged, relaxed? How did they respond to me? Have I established an atmosphere conducive to participation? If not, how can I improve this?
- Did I manage the discussion/activities so that they were consistently focused on the subject? If not, what strategies can I use to keep the students on track?
- Were the students prepared? If not, how can I encourage them to be better prepared in future? Can I direct their reading and other preparation through focused questions?

### **Communication and rapport**

- If called upon to explain something, did I do so clearly and in a way that resolved the difficulties experienced by individual students? Was there any query I couldn't deal with satisfactorily? If so, did I deal with this honestly and directly? And how will I follow up on this matter?
- Was my manner appropriate? Was I supportive but also clear in correcting misunderstandings? Did I show enthusiasm for the subject and concern for the progress of individual students?
- Did I show respect for all students, irrespective of their cultural and social backgrounds and personal characteristics, and did I ensure that students treated each other with this respect? Did I consistently use non-discriminatory language?

### **Conclusion**

- Did I draw things together at the end of the session? Did I indicate clearly to students what would be the subject of the next session and how they should prepare for it?

*(Adapted from James and Baldwin, 1997)*

### **Checklist for self-evaluation of laboratories and practical classes**

- Did I ensure that the students were clear about the purpose of the class and the procedures to be followed?
- Did my questions to students probe their understanding of underlying principles and concepts and help them to make meaningful connections and inferences?
- Did I demonstrate an interest in the subject and in the progress of the students? Was I readily available and helpful if they had queries? Did I manage to speak to all students individually?
- Were there any safety hazards involved? If so, were the students adequately briefed and was I sure about the procedures to follow if a risk emerged?
- Did the students manage their time satisfactorily? If not, where should I have intervened?
- If the class was divided into smaller groups for part of the session, how well did the students work in these groups? Did they all participate? Was sufficient time allowed for the activity?
- Were the reports from groups over-long, repetitive, unfocused? Did the general discussion build on the reports from groups to take up and debate key issues?
- In general discussion, did any students dominate? Did any not speak at all? If so, what might be the reasons for their silence? How can I encourage the quieter students and control those with a lot to say without undermining them?
- Did I manage the discussion in a way that reinforced both the value of intellectual disagreement and the importance of civility in pursuing it?
- Did anything go badly awry? If so, did I deal with it competently? If not, how could I have handled it better?

*(Adapted from James and Baldwin, 1997)*

## 9. Developing your teaching career

Many sessional teachers are interested in developing their teaching experience and pursuing an academic career. This section of the handbook offers advice on creating a teaching portfolio and information about professional development opportunities at the University.

### Creating a teaching portfolio

*Adapted from James and Baldwin, 1997*

All sessional teachers are strongly advised to develop a portfolio that describes their teaching experience and documents their achievements and effectiveness. Experience gained while teaching at the University of Melbourne can make a significant contribution to the personal and professional development of graduate students, in skills of presentation, leadership, group management, time management and other areas. Whatever career you wish to pursue, documentation of your teaching activities and achievements may at some stage come in handy.

If you are pursuing an academic career, the importance of doing research, winning grants, and publishing is well known. Your qualities and capacity as a teacher also figure highly. Teaching in tutorials or practical classes is an especially valuable apprenticeship for later academic teaching, and you should aim to keep a continual record of the scope and quality of your teaching, and of your development as a teacher in higher education.

#### ***What records should you keep?***

1. Keep a simple list of the classes taught.

Include details of the year level, number of students, and the teaching format or style expected of you.

2. Document the teaching methods used.

Include details of how you worked with students. For example, how did you encourage participation and engagement? How did you make yourself available to students? How did you give feedback?

3. Document evidence demonstrating the quality of your work.

Include details of student evaluations, feedback from peer observations, and ways that you have monitored and improved the quality of your teaching. Student outcomes and achievement are also a good source of evidence.

4. Record your contribution to your department and/or faculty.

After you have been teaching for a number of semesters, list ways that you have contributed to your department/faculty. How have you influenced course development? How have you helped to address any learning issues or problems? How have you assisted or worked collaboratively with colleague? Have you contributed to teaching innovations?

#### ***Organising your portfolio***

As the portfolio grows you will need to give careful thought to how the material is organised. There are no conventions for presenting a teaching portfolio, as there are for presenting academic research and publications. The way in which you present and substantiate an argument about your philosophy of teaching, your approaches to teaching, and your achievements and effectiveness may be very important if you are applying for a position, tenure or promotion, or preparing a report for an annual review. You should seek advice on the format for presentation.

It is much easier to accumulate a record of your teaching gradually, as you go, rather than to reconstruct it later - as people who have tried to reassemble their teaching careers overnight will attest. Make a habit of opening a file on your word processor and regularly adding notes on your teaching. Keep a box of relevant documents; it will be handy for providing evidence of your claims. You may never use all this information directly, but you will certainly draw on it in preparing applications.

## **Professional development opportunities**

In the area of teaching and learning, and other areas relevant to an academic career, the University of Melbourne offers a number of opportunities for professional development.

The first point of contact for you in terms of getting advice and information on professional development opportunities is your sessional staff coordinator. He/she should keep you informed about any faculty or department-based seminars as well as those run centrally by the CSHE. Professional development seminars and workshops are frequently offered by these centres/units:

### ***Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE)***

The CSHE is a centre responsible for research and teaching in the field of higher education, as well as for the provision of academic development services. It offers regular professional development programs including seminars and workshops on key issues in teaching.

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au>

T: 9344 4605

### ***Learning Environment Teaching and Learning Services for Staff***

The Unit has developed a series of useful resources on using educational technology in teaching and it runs seminars and workshops on specific topics such as using the LMS.

For general information see: <https://le.unimelb.edu.au/>

For information on the LMS see: <http://www.lms.unimelb.edu.au/teaching>

### ***Melbourne School of Graduate Research (MSGR)***

If you are a graduate student, you can participate in the programs run by the Melbourne School of Graduate Research. These include short skills programs, covering many areas such as computer skills, communication and research skills, and leadership.

<http://www.gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/programs/index.html>

T: 8344 8599

### ***Melbourne Research Office (MRO)***

The MRO offers workshops and seminars on topics relating to research including: how to manage research data, how to apply for ethics approval, how to write a research grant application etc. For more information see <http://www.research.unimelb.edu.au/>

### ***HR Development Opportunities for Staff***

The University offers development programs on a range of topics including Professional Effectiveness, Communication and more.

<http://www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/pd/courses>

For your local HR contact, see <http://www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/about/contacts>

## **10. Information and services for teachers at the University**

### **Relevant policies**

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism

<http://academichonesty.unimelb.edu.au/policy.html>

Academic Misconduct (Academic honesty and plagiarism)

<http://academichonesty.unimelb.edu.au/>

Copyright Information for Teaching and Support

<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/copyright/teaching.html>

Diversity, Discrimination and Sexual Harassment Policy

<http://www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/advice/equity-diversity>

Grievance Resolution

<http://www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/advice/policy-summaries/grievances>

Personnel Policy and Procedures (PPP) manual

<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/search?q=human+resources>

Student Discipline Statute

<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/Statutes/s131.html>

Student Expectations and Responsibilities Policy

<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1058>

Student Grievance Policy

<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1066>

Unsatisfactory Progress Policy

<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1025>

## **Services for student referral**

### **Academic Skills Unit (ASU)**

The ASU runs a range of workshops on study-related matters including English language skills. The Unit also offers an individual tutorial service to assist students with their individual study needs.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/academicskills/>

See your faculty Student Centre for more details

### **Disability Liaison Unit (DLU)**

The DLU provides support for students with a disability or long-term medical condition. It assists students who require note-takers or readers, materials in an alternate format, assistance in gaining access to library materials, specialised equipment, attendant care on campus and other University-related needs resulting from a disability.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/disability/>

T: 8344 0100

### **Careers and Employment**

The Unit offers programs in career planning and job searching skills. It provides assistance in finding vacation work and conducts an extensive graduate recruitment program in collaboration with employers.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/careers/>

T: 8344 0100

### **Chaplaincy and Multifaith Centre**

The chaplaincy provides information, counselling, support and information for all denominations. A chaplain for international students is available.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/chaplains/>

T: 9344 4825

### **Children's Services**

The Service provides assistance with arranging childcare for student and staff parents in University and community centres.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/childcare/>

T: 9344 9621

### **Counselling Services**

The Counselling Service offers help for students and staff with personal and university-related concerns including: stress management, family conflicts, relationship difficulties, depression, anxieties and so on.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/>

T: 8344 6927

### **International Student Services (ISS)**

The ISS provides support and advice for international students and their families as well as visiting scholars.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/international/>

T: 13 MELB (13 6352)



**Health Service**

The Health Service is a bulk-billing medical clinic with qualified doctors and nurses.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/health/>

T: 8344 6904

**Murrup Barak (Melbourne Institute for Indigenous Development)**

Murrup Barak assists indigenous students with various personal and study-related matters including course advice, accommodation, community networking, cross-cultural development, career counselling and more.

<http://murrupbarak.unimelb.edu.au>

T: 8344 7722

**Student Financial Aid**

Students can receive advice and assistance with matters relating to their finances. This includes advice on budgeting, student loans and bursaries, and government assistance through Centrelink.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/finaid/>

T: 13 MELB (13 6352)

**Student Housing Services**

Students who are looking for affordable and appropriate housing can seek advice and assistance from Student Housing Services.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/housing/>

T: 13 MELB (13 6352)

**Transition and Orientation programs**

The Transition Unit provides information and advice for students on their transition and orientation to university.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/transition/>

T: 13 MELB (13 6352)

## **Support for teaching staff**

### **Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE)**

The CSHE provides a range of resources and academic programs specifically for sessional teachers at the University. See the sessional staff website for more information.

[http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/prof\\_dev/sessional\\_teachers](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/prof_dev/sessional_teachers)

T: 8344 4605

### **Disability Liaison Unit (DLU)**

As well as providing assistance for students with disabilities, the Unit also liaises with teaching staff to make appropriate arrangements and provide advice about ways of enhancing the educational experiences and achievements of students with disabilities.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/disability/>

T: 9344 0100

### **Fairness and Diversity Unit**

The Unit offers programs and materials that deal with equal opportunity and sexual harassment issues in relation to teaching and learning, as well as employment.

<https://hr.unimelb.edu.au/advice/equity-diversity>

### **HR Advice and Support**

Staff members can contact HR to seek advice and support on issues relating to their employment and work at the University.

For your local HR contact, see <http://www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/about/contacts>

### **Melbourne Research Office**

The MRO provides information and advice for research staff and students on a range of topics including research grants, contracts, intellectual property, ethics and much more.

<http://www.research.unimelb.edu.au/>

T: 8344 2000

### **Multimedia for Learning and Teaching**

The University has a range of multimedia equipment, touch panel controls, and personal laptops installed in shared learning spaces and meeting rooms throughout the campus.

<https://le.unimelb.edu.au/room>

T: 8344 5600

### **Performance and Staff Development**

There is a wide range of professional development programs for staff organised through the University's Equity and Organisational Development (EOD).

<https://hr.unimelb.edu.au/pd>

## References and useful resources

- Arkoudis, S. (2006). *Teaching international students: Strategies to enhance learning*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.
- Axelrod, P. (2007). 'A history of good teaching: student perspectives'. Retrieved 2/3/08 from [www.cou.on.ca/content/objects/DavidSmithLecture2007.pdf](http://www.cou.on.ca/content/objects/DavidSmithLecture2007.pdf)
- Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at University*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Cannon, R. & Newble, D. (2000). *A handbook for teachers in universities and colleges: A guide to improving teaching methods*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, London: Kogan Page Ltd.
- Exkey, K. & Dennick, R. (2004). *Small group teaching: Tutorials, seminars and beyond*, London: Routledge Falmer.
- Farrell, K. (2012). Collegial feedback on teaching: A guide to peer review. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.
- Hartley, J. (1998). *Learning and studying: A research perspective*, London: Routledge.
- James, R. & Baldwin, G. (1997). *Tutoring and demonstrating: A guide for the University of Melbourne*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.
- Krause, K. (2005). *Ten year trends in the first-year experience at the University of Melbourne 1994-2004*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.
- Nash, M. (2011). Tutoring in Interdisciplinary subjects. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne
- Pearce, J., Mulder, R. & Baik, C. (2009). *Involving students in peer review: Case studies and practical strategies for university teaching*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.
- Race, P. & Brown, S. (2000). *500 tips on group learning*, London: Kogan Page.
- Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in Higher Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Tiberius, R.G. (1989). *Small-group teaching: A trouble-shooting guide*, Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-Centred teaching*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### Web resources

Assessing Learning in Higher Education website, CSHE, The University of Melbourne

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/index.html>

Bioassess: Enhancing assessment in the biological sciences, CSHE, the University of Melbourne

<http://www.bioassess.edu.au/>

Teaching toolbox – practical aspects, TEDI, University of Queensland

<http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/teaching/>

Small group teaching, Oxford Brookes University

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid/resources/small-group/index.html>

Tutor training: Professional development online, Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Melbourne

[http://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/celt/staff/tutors/tutor\\_resources](http://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/celt/staff/tutors/tutor_resources)