

8. CREATING ENGAGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES



More effective learning occurs when the learning experiences are engaging, that is, when the students are 'doing' rather than just 'listening'. Increasing student engagement is likely to improve the quality of learning and reduce the challenges teachers may encounter in the learning environment.

Traditional university teaching and learning is often transmissive: it focuses on communicating information (or 'content') to students. Today's students do not usually learn effectively by listening passively, note-taking and absorbing information. They learn more effectively if they are actively engaged in the learning experience. This means less didactic content delivery and more interaction. Two-way interaction between teachers and peers, in all learning environments, means that learning becomes a dialogue: the nature of university learning is that a concept is presented by the teacher, the student responds, the teacher clarifies, the student seeks further clarification again, and so on, until complex intellectual concepts are clear. This can of course involve multiple teachers and students in various roles. Quality interaction is likely to lead to more effective learning (see Laurillard in recommended further reading).



Recommended further reading:

Coates, H. (2005). The value of student engagement for higher education quality assurance. *Quality in Higher Education*, 11(1), 25 - 36.

Krause, K.-L., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education University of Melbourne. From http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications

Laurillard, D. (2002). *Rethinking university teaching: A framework for the effective use of educational technology* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge Palmer.

Challenges you might encounter and what to do about them

Surface approaches to learning: Students who adopt a surface approach to learning are driven by the desire to complete the task, particularly assessment, and treat it as an external imposition; they focus on 'the signs' (for example, the formula needed to solve the problem) and on unrelated parts of the task or they memorise information for assessments, associate facts and concepts unreflectively and fail to distinguish principles from examples. A surface approach to learning is encouraged by teachers who demand mostly memorisation; rote learning and a focus on marks through assessment (which creates anxiety), overloading the curriculum with excessive material (and focus on 'covering it'), giving little or no feedback on progress, and little choice in methods of learning. Surface approaches to learning are more common among younger students and are reinforced when students come from school systems where attainment in the qualifying entrance examination is seen as an end in itself.



Recommended further reading:

Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Students' attention span and expectations: Very few of us attend regular lectures these days; most information comes to us electronically in rich media environments. Your students are unlikely to be accustomed to sitting for long periods simply listening to someone talk. They need learning experiences which have shape and a clear structure, and will appreciate helpful visual information and interaction with you and their peers. Many students expect to come to lectures and be able to simply listen, and to hear 'answers' which they will jot down so that they acquire a set of 'notes'. Notes are a good learning tool, but they are not the sum total of learning. Very few complex concepts can readily be reduced to a set of notes. The lecture venue suggests you are the 'sage on the stage', and that you are likely to inform or entertain. While there is nothing wrong with an entertaining learning experience (as long as appropriate learning is the outcome), you may find that students have an expectation that classes should have 'entertainment value'. Even though students have a copy of the unit outline stating the unit expectations, do not assume that the students will read or remember all that they are given. It is vital that you articulate and negotiate your expectations of the teaching and learning experience in the first week of student contact. However, as the students will be overloaded with information during the first weeks, you will need to state your expectations in the context of the unit and the course learning outcomes several times over the semester, both verbally and in a written format. These expectations will be supported by the content and assessments.

'Noise' and disruptive behaviour: Noise is anything physical, psychological or semantic that can interfere with communication. We have difficulty learning when we are tired, hungry, anxious, distracted, cannot see or hear well, or when technology fails to deliver. You might counter these distractions by being conscious of how your students are likely to be feeling, to communicate that with them, and use techniques to overcome them. If you have a face-to-face class early in the morning, or last thing on a Friday evening, for example, acknowledge the feelings that your students might have, and try to get them to work with you. Face-to-face and online learning experiences can be havens for disruptive students. Avoid letting these students take control of the learning space by inviting them to re-focus on their learning, asking them questions related to the lecture, breaking large groups into pairs for short sessions, or challenging them to continue their socialising elsewhere. In face-to-face settings, it can be wise to move around if you can; make sure you can be heard. You should also consider strategies for avoiding disruption; do not ask 500 students to start moving around the lecture theatre, or distribute papers when you are trying to explain a difficult concept, for example. Plan large face-to-face classes so that there will be as little chaos as possible and have a device for calling students back to attention (a bell, music, change of light) if you ask them to work in groups or pairs.

Student absence from class: Students often have significant commitments outside university and many live below the poverty line so work is essential for survival. Some students do not always attend face-to-face classes and this is strongly discouraged, even though there are compelling reasons for non attendance (e.g. childcare, transport). However, using class time to deliver information already available (e.g. reading the textbook to students during class) is very annoying to students, and likely to lead to absenteeism. Make key information available prior to the event, tell students to read it, then use the class to apply that information and get them interacting in pairs or small groups, problem-solving, working on case studies or scenarios and use this opportunity to provide students with feedback on their performance. The lecture or large class is better used to lead, guide and enable student learning, not just to deliver information. If your class can just as easily be captured by getting

a set of notes from a fellow student, or online, then many students will opt not to attend. Some students fail to attend classes because they are disorganised. It is essential that students (particularly first years) organise a semester calendar of work so that they can identify and plan around high workload periods. Advise students to look at the Curtin Calendar which gives details of important university dates, exam times and holidays. The Online Timetable Planner (www.timetable.student.curtin.edu.au) is available to Bentley students and enables students to plan their classes online. They can see when lectures, tutorials and other activities are available and plan their schedule accordingly. In the first week of semester students receive the unit outline and study guide for each of their units. Encourage them to mark on their timetable, dates when lectures and tutorials are held, tests are set, assignments are due, and any other significant events. Students can then consider the study preparation time required for all these activities.

Students' unwillingness to read or prepare for classes: Evidence suggests that today's students are less interested in reading university texts. There are several ways of having students acquire the information they need. For example, set pairs of students to read a different text each, and report the findings to the group (and so they practice summarising and evaluating information, and presenting as well). Set one essential reading, and set the students the task of finding another of equal worth, then have them justify their choice to the group. Take one essential reading and do a guided reading in class: working through the text, pointing out strengths and weaknesses. Have students work on other readings individually or in pairs, and present their findings to the group. You might also consider using a problem-based approach where students are presented with a scenario (e.g. the symptoms of a patient presenting for physiotherapy or occupational therapy), and set the students the task of researching the latest findings in a particular area of diagnosis. Students often respond well when they are set a task which they are likely to have to perform in their subsequent profession.

Students' unwillingness to participate in class discussion: University teachers frequently comment that they have great difficulty getting students to talk in class or participate in online discussion forums. Students may be shy, feel intimidated, be unprepared, or may have language difficulties. You can address this issue by communicating frankly with your students about the problem, and explaining that university learning is about understanding concepts from others' perspectives. You may find that students participate more if you ask them to work in pairs first, then in larger groups, then as a whole group. Creating a safe and supportive learning environment, as well as giving sufficient time for students for whom English is a second language to formulate their thoughts and prepare them for discussion is important in encouraging students to contribute to class discussion.



If you believe your students have language difficulties, contact The Learning Centre (www.learningsupport.curtin.edu.au/) or Curtin UniEnglish (www.unienglish.curtin.edu.au/). In Curtin Business School, the Communication Skills Centre (www.business.curtin.edu.au/business/current-students/writing-and-study-skills-support) provides assistance. Counselling and Health Services runs workshops on issues such as presentation anxiety (www.counselling.curtin.edu.au/).

Poor access to reliable technology, and computer and internet literacy: While the majority of Curtin students have good access off-campus, there are still students who do not. You should not assume that your students have strong computer and internet literacy; like their teachers, students can be at very different points in their education and inclination to use technology. Consider discussing with your students these matters, particularly if they are essential to your unit.

Pitching at the wrong level - find out what your students already know: Begin your unit by finding out what your students know: ask students whether they believe they can already perform the unit learning outcomes, and if so, how well using a simple scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 indicates no confidence and 10 indicates total confidence). It is important to explain to students that you are gauging their level of confidence so you have a better idea of what to emphasise in the course. Give students feedback on the results of the task; let them know how they stand in relation to others, and how you will be tailoring the unit to suit their needs.

Chaotic beginnings and endings of classes: Have a set starting time, and start punctually. Call the students to attention. Be clear, firm and direct. Welcome the students and tell them the intended outcomes of the class. Refresh their memories about what they learnt last week. Ask them to tell you, or better still, how they witnessed some application of last week's learning in their lives; on the news, at home or at work, if appropriate. When they are settled and engaged, provide a clear outline of what they will be doing in the class, and why. Be aware that as soon as you signal the end of the class, there will be distracting movement as students prepare to leave. It might be helpful use the last few minutes to summarise the main points (or whatever is appropriate to the learning outcomes) or to ask the students to self-assess (have they mastered the learning outcomes? what is still unclear?). Make important announcements (e.g. reminders about assignments) at the beginning or during the class, not as students are leaving.

Engaging students in face-to-face classes

Interaction is easiest to initiate in small groups, but the reality is that most classes are large, and may take place in a lecture theatre which has fixed tiered seating. This makes interaction more difficult, but certainly not impossible. Engaging and effective classes happen when students interact with each other and with you. To make your face-to-face classes engaging, try these:

- Have students draw on their previous learning;
- Use latest research findings, professional examples and interesting scenarios to take students beyond the textbook;
- Include periods of reflection for students to work alone and solve problems;
- Give them a quick quiz and ask them to explain their answers to their neighbour before supplying them with the correct responses;
- Ask them to brainstorm examples of real-life situations;
- Ask them to role-play a scenario in pairs;
- Ask them to define or explain a concept to their neighbour;
- Ask them to construct a mind-map showing the links between ideas.
- Take one minute to summarise the main ideas in the lecture;
- Write questions about concepts that are still unclear.

- Move around the room and make sure you can be heard;
- Have a small team of students present one side of a debate, and have the rest of the class create the rebuttal as they listen; and
- Ask students to create a scenario based on their recent workplace experience.

Engaging students in laboratory classes

Ensure that you are proficient in the practical procedures the students perform in the laboratory, and that you can make links between the activities and theory. As a laboratory instructor you can facilitate learning by roving amongst the students and by:

- Ensuring that they are 'on-task' and clear about the tasks;
- Prompting students with questions that help them to think through problems;
- Encouraging students to help each other when they are stuck;
- Answering questions which keep students focused;
- Modelling procedures before students attempt the task on their own; and
- Monitoring student behaviour to ensure that it is inclusive.

At the end of a session, ask the students to summarise what they learnt, answer any final questions and direct students to the preparation for the next class. If laboratory reports are required, make sure students are aware of the structure of the reports, the criteria by which these will be marked, the referencing procedures, and the format and length expected. It is a university requirement that you make students aware of all the rules regarding appropriate behaviour in the laboratory and the handling of materials, especially dangerous substances, on their first day in the laboratory. Check with your school regarding safety procedures. These must be provided in writing to the students free of charge and regularly reinforced.



Maintenance at Curtin provides the servicing of facilities necessary for the teaching, research and administration of the University. If a learning space requires maintenance, such as, broken chairs replaced or other minor issues, please report to www.properties.curtin.edu.au/roles/fm/maintenance/index.cfm

Engaging students in fieldwork and practicums

Give students clear guidelines and outcomes for the fieldwork or practicum. Make a clear link between the practical experience and theory, before and after the experience.

Wherever possible, fieldtrips should be restricted to locations within the State, and as close to home base as possible. Students with a disability may have specific requirements in these course components. Before embarking on the practical component, the students should be fully aware of the required knowledge, behaviour, equipment (e.g. safety boots) and material (e.g. notebooks). The fieldtrip must be well-organised for maximum student participation with time to collect and record information, practise skills and ask questions. You can encourage student engagement in fieldwork by:

- Selecting interesting, relevant and instructive sites or placements;
- Encouraging interaction and hands on experience (e.g. writing in medical notes; use of equipment);
- Requiring the students to complete questions and activities and solve problems;
- Making the collection of data an integral component of the experience;

- Requiring students to work in teams and monitoring student behaviour to ensure that it is inclusive;
- Allowing ample opportunities for students to ask questions, discuss, clarify concepts and practise skills; and
- Providing opportunities to debrief and summarise the key learning outcomes.

In subsequent classes, synthesise the information obtained from the practicum or field experience with the concepts taught in class, and use the experience as an example when explaining other related concepts. In order to assess the practical component, the experience can be written up as a report or assignment, presented to the class orally or assessed in the final examination. It is important that you plan alternative activities, especially if part of the field component is dependent on the weather.



If excursions, camps and field trips are compulsory then, according to University policy, they must be an integral component of the course with appropriate assessment and allotment of marks. Where fieldwork or practicums are compulsory, Curtin's policies on anti-discrimination apply and you should ensure that accommodation can be made in relation to any circumstances related to grounds included in the policies such as family responsibilities or religious convictions. University policy states that if an excursion, field trip or camp is voluntary, students will not be penalised for non-attendance. See www.policies.curtin.edu.au/documents/excursions_camps_field_training.doc and www.fieldworkeducation.curtin.edu.au/. It must also be made clear to students in the unit outline that they are expected to meet the costs of fares and living expenses of voluntary excursions and field trips. For information on work/field experience and practicums insurance issues, see www.corporaterisk.curtin.edu.au/insurance/personal_accident.cfm

Engaging students in supervised research

The University expects that research supervisors will provide appropriate academic support to develop students' understanding, ability and independence in the field of research. Throughout candidacy, supervisors are expected to:

- Maintain close and regular contact with the student;
- Assist the student to develop their research plan and ensure completion of the Application for Candidacy and other forms as required;
- Monitor the performance and regularly review the status of the student and deal promptly with any issues related to progress or standard of work. Consult with other members of the Thesis Committee if problems persist;
- Comment on the content and the drafts of the thesis, providing prompt and constructive feedback;
- Ensure the student's access to facilities and resources required for research as detailed in Essential Facilities for On-campus/Off-campus Higher Degree by Research Students (e.g. software, funding for consumables, etc.);
- Organise literacy and writing assistance through The Learning Centre;
- Discuss completion of the Annual Progress Report with the student, ensuring that any difficulties or problems are noted; and

- Make suitable arrangements for alternative supervision in advance if planning to take leave during the period of candidature.

At the time of submission, the supervisor must certify that the thesis is properly presented, conforms to the Rules and is therefore, prima facie, worthy of examination. If a student has consistently failed to take advice and you believe the thesis is not of suitable standard for submission, supervisors are not obliged to recommend the student's thesis for examination. All students first enrolled from 1 January 2005 are required to submit the final version of their thesis in digital format to the Library, in accordance with the Guidelines for the Submission of Digital Theses of Higher Degree by Research Students, in addition to the required number of hard copies. Theses will be made available through the Australasian Digital Thesis Program distributed database which provides nation-wide access to the student's completed thesis. See www.research.curtin.edu.au/guides/hdrguidelines/thesisprep.cfm



Supervisors are expected to be familiar with and abide by:

- University, Faculty and School/Department requirements for research supervision;
- Facilitating Excellence in Research Training (www.research.curtin.edu.au/about/publications.cfm);
- Essential Facilities for Higher Degree by Research Students (www.research.curtin.edu.au/forms/policies.cfm#essential);
- The Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (www.research.curtin.edu.au/forms/policies.cfm#conduct);
- Rule No. 10 Pursuant to Statute 12 - Enrolment: Degree of Doctor by Research and Rule No. 11 Pursuant to Statute 12 - Enrolment: Degree of Master by Research (www.research.curtin.edu.au/forms/policies.cfm#rules);
- The Register of Supervisors of Higher Degree by Research Students Policy and Procedures (www.research.curtin.edu.au/forms/policies.cfm#register).