

Red Guides Paper 55

Collection of Teaching Tips/Advice to New
Higher Education Lecturers

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Red Guides address educational and staff development issues within Higher Education and are aimed at colleagues within the University and at other institutions. Some describe current good practice in Higher education, others evaluate and/or comment on curriculum development and many provide ideas for teaching. All are meant to stimulate discussion, initiate action and implement change.

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Introduction

Although there is a multitude of books and resources available to new staff, it could be argued that there is nothing better than the advice from colleagues who are aware of and have the experience of the local context. This guide is the result of an email which was sent to academic staff inviting them to tell us their teaching tips. Many thanks go to the contributors who are listed at the back of this volume. Many of the tips are substantiated by the literature and references are cited, where appropriate, to sources which have affirmed our staffs' advice. Additional tips have been garnered from the literature plus some additional advice from the 'coalface'. When looking through the tips provided by staff, there appeared to be a number of common themes emerging, for ease of reference the tips are arranged under five headings which we hope have captured the essence of the advice passed on to us:

- On the front line (covering the reality of the classroom)
- We are human (featuring issues surrounding confidence)
- Avoid the technology trap (or basically steer clear of 'Death by PowerPoint')
- Be prepared... (organisation, organisation, organisation)
- The instant generation? (on student expectations, communication)

On the front line

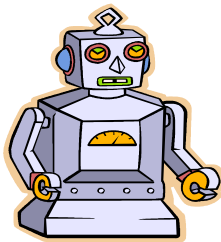
- Always remember that your experience of covering the syllabus may not be matched by your audience. (Or put another way; be careful to resist the temptation to rush to cover everything in the syllabus if the class is struggling).
- Understanding as much as possible who the people in the classroom are – what they bring to the class, what they don't bring to the class – is vitally important for achieving goals and for overall communication in the classroom. (DeRogatis 2007) – *more useful for seminar situations*
- Make a safe environment for students – respectful and non-threatening to encourage risk-taking and self-discovery (Cook et al 2007).
- Don't feel that you have to fill every minute of a lecture/seminar with your delivery: Let the students do at least some of the work, by posing some questions, inviting debate.
- Don't talk at your students. Talk to them, or better still, talk with them. Keep your own voice in balance – don't overestimate the value of your own contribution and underestimate the value of the students' contributions (Brookfield & Preskill 2005).
- Try to vary activities across different (and during individual) teaching sessions.
- Be imaginative with the teaching spaces given you! We often have large class numbers, static benches/tables and tiered seating, but that doesn't prevent more participatory, mobile and interactive pedagogies. (Askins 2008)



- Never ask a question in a lecture and answer it yourself.
- Always give the students time to answer it, no matter how long it takes... *these two tips link nicely to...*
- ...Don't mind the silence – it's the sound of thinking (Brookfield & Preskill 2005).
- Manage seminar discussions carefully and effectively. Don't allow any student to talk too much and even worse off topic – this can impact on being able to effectively engage others.
- Effective discussions don't just happen... early in the term - in the first class meeting, if possible - conduct some problem solving in groups of 2 or 3 students. Over time, expand group size, as problems become more complex.
(<http://www.developfaculty.com/tips.html>)
- Within a module of say 12 lectures you will not have time to make every lecture a 'keynote address' – select maybe 3 that you are going to add the bells and whistles to – the others can be more traditional/standard approaches.
- It may be lecture time but don't feel forced to talk at them. Break the time up by using a quick interactive activity, this could be as simple as getting students in pairs and asking one to summarise what has been covered so far to the other.
- Demos, visual aids, technology break down the pace, help maintain student interest (Carbone 1998).
- Set ground rules before starting your lecture. E.g. switching off mobile phones.

- A tip on managing behaviour, if people at the back, for instance, are chatting I would say “some people in the back appear to have an important contribution to make. Can we all listen to what they have to say and then I’ll continue” - this usually does the trick.
- Think about your position spatially in relation to the students, especially if trying to encourage student participation. E.g. if a student is making a comment and speaking to the class as part of a debate if you stand very close to them they will end up speaking to you only and the rest of the class will miss out whereas if you stand with the rest of the class between you and the student who is speaking it can encourage them to address the whole class.
- Draw a line between being a friendly face to a student and being a student's mate. Crossing the line works until the student has to be admonished or given criticism.

We are human



- Don't expect to be perfect from day one. Teaching is a learning process too.
- Put yourself in their position; never forget that you were a student once.
- A bit of obvious enthusiasm goes a long way. It is why students attend class rather than reading a book or visiting a website (Astrachan et al 2007).
- Don't worry about getting all of your students to like you. It is likely that 25% will love you, 25% will dislike you and the other 50% will not care one


way or another. Any better response than that is an achievement.

- Occasionally take risks – if you have an idea for a new/innovative way of delivering a session give it a go – my experience is that students like a variety of approaches – reflect on it – if it goes well, great – if it bombs drop it for next year – it is not the end of the world.
- Students don't expect you to know everything about your discipline but they do expect you to know how to find out – just as you do with them! *and here is a similar three point plan...*
- ...There are 3 good tactics after you have honestly said I don't know:
 1. ask the rest of the class if anyone knows,
 2. go and find out the answer, and contact the student to let them know,
 3. suggest how the student could go about finding the answer; this encourages students to become independent learners.
- Don't dwell on the flaws, because they will too! Be honest and self-aware but not apologetic (Astrachan et al 2007)
- Encourage your students to become critical friends this could be done via an anonymous suggestions folder on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This could help you pick up on the parts of the curriculum they 'struggle' with.
- Audio visual aids (AVA) are very useful teaching tools, but remember that the teacher is often the best AVA. Use your natural abilities to the full.

Don't get flustered when the technology let's you down, you are your own best asset.

- Think of the worst lecturer you experienced as an undergraduate and reassure yourself you can't be any worse than that!

The technology trap

- Be prepared to abandon PowerPoint and use the whiteboard at moments when this would help you be responsive to student questions. 
- Be creative with tools to engage all types of learners, auditory, visual etc. (Cook et al 2007).
- Find ways to involve students as much as possible via VLE material such as discussion boards, quizzes etc.
- Engage the students with the technology not bore them with it. One way is by incorporating personal response systems. Northumbria University uses TurningPoint and in house training is available to Northumbria staff.
- Go beyond using the VLE as a 'file box', how about quizzes, wikis, blogs etc. Northumbria staff needing to know more should contact Academic Registry (LTech) for training and support.
- Use images to help structure your delivery Different images can be used to suggest different types of evaluation questions. E.g. an archery target can represent closed questions on predetermined topics whereas going through the archway into the secret garden represents exploratory questions. You can tell it works when students start using the 'image metaphors' for

themselves... 'This is a hitting the target approach; we're going through that dark archway here'.


Like the scouts...be prepared



- Tell them what you are going to tell them; tell them; tell them what you have told them! (Carbone 1998).
- Always look at your teaching sessions from the students' point of view. The best teaching sessions are those which challenge students enough to stretch them but are sufficiently accessible and relevant to make them feel comfortable and engaged. A really good way of achieving this is to use examples from students' own experience.
- Overdependence on lecturing and other instructor-centred learning strategies often fosters a passive learning attitude...remember students learn only 10% of what they read, but 80% of what they personally experience and 90% of what they teach others. (<http://www.developfaculty.com/tips.html>)
- Prepare a roadmap of the course, comprising various 'local visit' plans, i.e. lesson outlines (Hativa 2000).
- Don't overburden students with information from the start. Use the VLE to its full capacity the 'display from and until' features are a great tool for helping assist with your own and your students' time management.
- Provide incomplete notes rather than full handouts – e.g. concept maps, flow charts with definitions for them to fill in during lecture (Herbert et al 2003).

- Some students have difficulty understanding abstract thinking and conceptualization, by incorporating concept mapping it can help them to learn by visualizing the thinking process (Malu & Figlear 2001).
- Keep the students on their toes! Begin the next lecture/seminar with a question from material of the previous one.
- Create continuity between lectures – prepare questions for students to ponder for next lecture (Herbert et al 2003).
- Be adaptive. Think fast if you are running out of time. What is expendable so that you can achieve closure? (Cook et al 2007).
- Find out about Assessment for Learning (AfL) http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/ before setting any assessments – see if your current assignments pass the AfL test.
- Don't assume students know what you expect, spend a little time in your first seminar/tutorial to set out what you require of them and what will be received in return. This should hopefully pave the way for a smooth staff/student teaching relationship!

The instant generation

- Make the VLE your friend, announcements and email facilities are a great way of instantly communicating with your students. 
- In general, the students appreciate it when we are *available*. If possible schedule informal meeting time, e.g. American idea of a 'brown bag' lunch (Carbone 1998).

- Consider blocking out a period of time occasionally to provide one-on-one tutoring to individual students. This might be accomplished while remaining students are engaged in a cooperative learning or some other more individualized activity. (<http://www.developfaculty.com/tips.html>)
- Let them know what to expect well in advance of it being required so that they can manage their time effectively.
- Be 'diversity friendly'. Try to be sensitive to your student's needs, not only in terms of the ways in which they like to learn (learning styles) but also in terms of conflicting priorities outside University (work, family commitments). You can go some way to doing this by creating a wider range of learning opportunities than just timetabled contact hours.
- Use 'Quick thinks' as a small group strategy. E.g. students could paraphrase an idea; present an opposing and supporting view, or set a question for others (Johnston & Cooper 1997; Cooper & Robinson 2000).
- Got a minute? Ask students to write a 'one minute essay' listing the one key point they feel the lecturer has made and the one question they still have. This creates a basis for some discussion in the next lecture and students gain some confidence from knowing that their questions are taken seriously (Young 1997).
- Don't lecture all the time. Use a mix of activities, including individual and small group work. Keep the questions/applications/scenarios short and focused (5 minutes or so).

- Remember the 20-minute boredom threshold and Bligh's (1974) learning curve - change the format used in a session every 20 mins (Cox 1994).
- Note - during the first 10 mins of a lecture, 70% of information is retained. During the last 10 mins, 20% is retained. (McKeachie 1999).

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