

Seven simple suggestions to be a better teacher sooner: experiences of a nearly new lecturer

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Seven simple suggestions to be a better teacher sooner: experiences of a nearly new lecturer

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ABSTRACT

New lecturers are often put in the position of having to teach at short notice and with no formal teacher training. Therefore, it would seem prudent to try and provide some simple and easily achieved suggestions on teaching practice for new lecturers. This paper outlines my experiences of my first few years of teaching. As a nearly new lecturer myself, I feel I am in a good position to relate these experiences to other new lecturers. Therefore, I present seven simple suggestions that I remind myself of when teaching, and that I think would be of use to new lecturers in making them better teachers sooner.

INTRODUCTION

The process by which lecturers are made has always struck me as quite odd. You toil for years as a graduate student and young independent researcher, focussing almost exclusively on your own work, and generally only interacting with a few collaborators who are more senior researchers in your field of expertise. Then one day you become a lecturer. Suddenly you are expected to teach by interacting with many people who may be wholly unfamiliar with your subject. While the requirements of these two roles are clearly quite unrelated, this metamorphosis from researcher to lecturer usually happens overnight and without any formal training in how to go about teaching effectively.

For those who are metamorphosing and are looking for support or advice, there are papers written by seasoned academics that provide useful advice on life as an academic, including general advice on teaching. In particular I would highlight the wonderfully concise 'Letter to a new university teacher' (Hay, 2002), which has since been updated and commented on (Hay et al., 2013). But as a nearly new lecturer, I think I am in some respects in a better position to empathise with other new lecturers, and as such I can offer some very specific advice on a few steps that can be taken to immediately improve the quality of the student's learning experience and the quality of teaching practice. I think this is an important point, as perhaps rather worryingly, while many of the teaching practices I have now adopted are very simple, because of the very different roles of a researcher and a lecturer they were simply not obvious to me as a researcher who had just become a lecturer. I would also suggest that the voice of the new lecturer is not represented well in the teaching literature, perhaps because most new lecturers may not feel confident in publicly voicing their opinions and admitting their mistakes. Therefore, to try to provide some advice to other new lecturers, and to continue to remind myself as a nearly new lecturer, I have outlined seven simple suggestions for improving teaching based on my experiences that will hopefully resonate with new lecturers, and enable them to metamorphose into better teachers sooner.

1. ESTABLISH EXPECTATIONS

You should always try to be clear about what you aim to teach, and perhaps even what it won't be teaching. This should be clear in course descriptors, but these can be outdated or vague, so it is best to be make a specific effort. This is also an opportunity for you to explain what you expect of the students (attendance, pre-lecture readings, etc.) and what the students can expect of you (office hours, marking turnaround

times, etc.). This process of clarifying expectations can be started by contacting your class ahead of the first session to introduce yourself and the course. This way everyone comes prepared on the first day, and so there are no surprised or disappointed students.

2. CONNECT YOUR TEACHING TO YOUR RESEARCH

Connecting students to your, or your colleague's or institution's, research is the first dimension of the 'Connected Curriculum' framework. The idea here is that by connecting to real world research, students can develop an awareness of the value of research to society, and can even begin a journey towards developing their own research questions (Fung, 2017). I interpret this as demonstrating how the information and skills you are teaching can be combined to create knowledge for society. Remember that while you as a lecturer have a strong connection to your subject area, and know the relevance and importance of what is being taught, at the start of a course students will have no connection to the subject area. While the goal of a course is obviously to connect the students with your subject area, the most accessible way that they can begin to connect to the subject area is via you as a lecturer. Therefore, it is important that you can act as a conduit of relevance so students can initially contextualise the subject area indirectly via your experiences, to ultimately make a direct connection of their own (Figure 1).

While a whole curriculum can be designed to promote student connections through the use of research projects or affiliations to research groups (Fung, 2017), as a new lecturer you probably won't have the time or authority to achieve such things initially. But a connection can still be made and reinforced throughout the course by using personal anecdotes and stories of your past experiences. These personal examples are engaging and make the subject appear less abstract and more human. I would also add that I have found it much easier to talk about examples of my own research, rather than to try and present other people's research that may form the basis of teaching materials I have inherited. Demonstrating how you have applied the theories and skills you are teaching in your own career will also demonstrate your credentials to the students as a new lecturer who they don't know, and remind yourself of your credentials at a time when you may be doubting about your capability to teach the subject.

3. RECOGNISE THE ADULT LEARNER

The adult learner has some unique characteristics (Fogarty and Pete, 2004), of which I will highlight those relating directly to my experiences. Adult learners want to know why you are asking them to learn what you are trying to teach them. This issue of 'why' is perhaps the most important concept I learnt during my training, as without knowing why, learners may be unwilling to fully commit to an activity. With hindsight, I can see this was something I was encountering on a frequent basis, and now that I am aware, it is something that I can easily resolve. Therefore, I endeavour to make it clear at the outset of each task and activity why I am asking my students to do certain things (thinking this through also helps a teacher decide if the learning activity is appropriate). This clarifying of 'why' amongst all other changes I made to my teaching has provided the most positive feedback from students.

Adult learners want to take control of their learning and focus on the issues that concern them. Given the variety of students that you are likely to have in a class, it will be impossible to meet these desires with a wholly predetermined curriculum and set of activities. While you as a lecturer must dictate the core of what is done, there are ways of adapting the learning process to individual desires. For example, Unwin (1980) advocated that practical exercises should be made as open as possible by allowing students to use data or a topic that is of interest to them. This is something I have tried to do by asking students to note down their personal interests so that I could give several different topics on which to base their course project. I have then been able to present three different projects that could be completed, all of which were very similar, but simply put the theory and methods being looked at in slightly different contexts. This is something that seems to work very well, and from feedback was appreciated by the students, and so is something that I will continue to do in the future.

4. BREAK UP YOUR LECTURES

Overall I would say that on balance, when it comes to lectures as a teaching method, the pros are outweighed by the cons (Figure 2). However, lectures are not all bad, and the relative ease with which a lecture can be prepared (in contrast to laboratories or field trips) is likely to mean that lectures will form

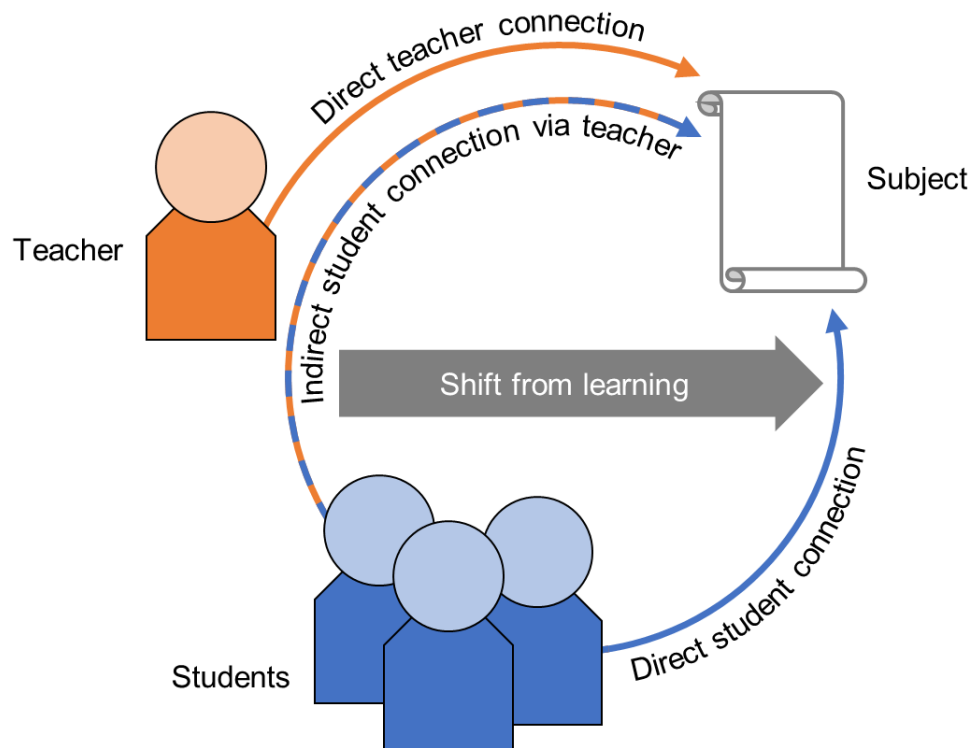


Figure 1. Successful teaching and learning is dependent on making connections between the teacher, the student, and the subject.

the basis of many new lecturers' teaching – especially if inherited lecture slides only need to be updated or adapted. So, while in the longer term you may want to reconsider whether lectures are really the way you want to teach, in the short term you should do that which you can to make the lectures work as well as possible.

For lectures to be successful, teachers need to recognise that attention drops very quickly after about ten minutes, and that regular breaks or changes in activity are required to reinvigorate student's attention (Biggs, 1999). Taking breaks or changing activity is not something that I had even considered, perhaps because I was not taught in this way, but having tried implementing some of these types of short activities to break up a lecture, this is something I would highly recommend. I would also add that pausing mid-lecture also gives you as a lecturer a break to gather your thoughts – and rest your voice! There are resources available that suggest some options for how to break up lectures (Gibbs, 1992; Silberman, 1996), and some personal examples that I have used to break up a lecture are: video clips, interactive experimentation of theory with computer models, and brainstorming how students could apply the learning to something they are interested in.

5. RECOGNISE DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

As a teacher, it is important to recognise that not everyone learns in the same way. There are a variety of learning style models that can be used to help guide a teacher's thoughts (Hawk and Shah, 2007), of which the VARK model that recognises learning can be based on visual, aural, reading/writing, or kinesthetic activities makes most intuitive sense to me. The traditional approach in tertiary teaching of using lectures and essays favours those students who have preferences for aural, reading, and writing learning. Therefore, to connect with as many students as possible it is important for a teacher to try and vary their teaching style. For example, I know that I am a very visual learner and so I tend to use a lot of

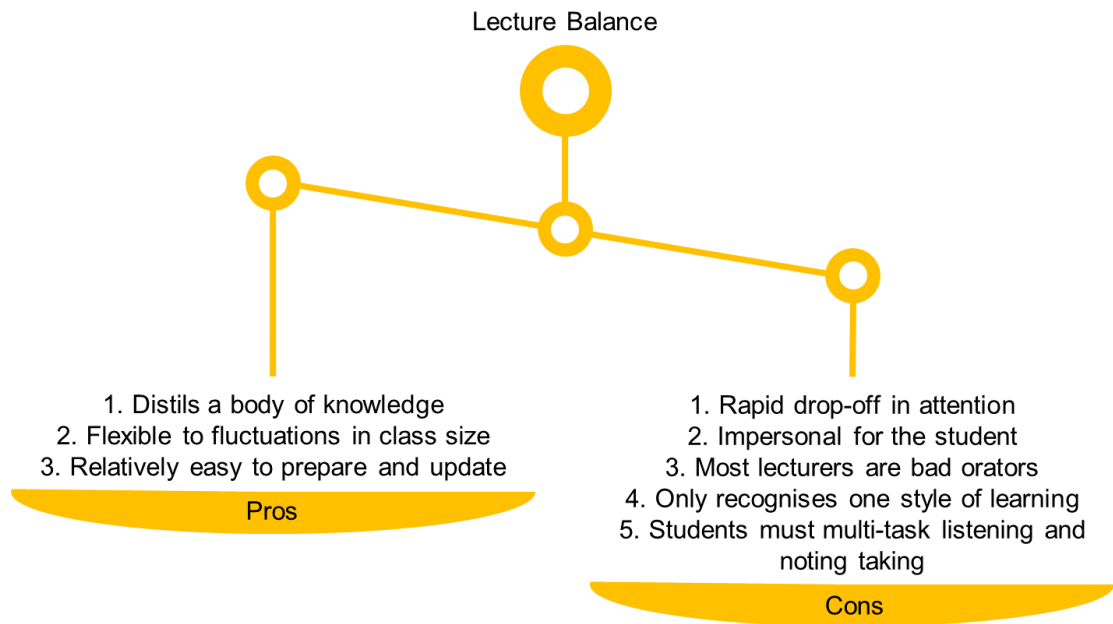


Figure 2. Balancing the pros and cons of teaching using lectures.

illustrations in my teaching, but that I perhaps fail to provide enough opportunities for kinesthetic learning. Again, as a new lecturer you may not have much time to develop new and exciting teaching materials, but this is something that should always be considered, and acted upon when possible.

6. REFLECT ON YOUR TEACHING

‘Reflective practice’ plays a major role in the development of modern teaching. Larrivee (2000, p.294) contends that “unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery they stay trapped in unexamined judgements, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations”. I view this process as a continuous spiral that requires the teacher to teach, reflect, conclude, and plan to refine and develop their teaching practice (Figure 3). Such reflections can work on different time scales. Sometimes you may be able to reflect on something after one lecture, and make changes in time for the next lecture. Other times you may have to just keep notes and review things at the end of the course.

But for busy new lecturers who face multiple demands on their time (writing and reviewing research papers, submitting funding applications, supervising students, teaching, marking ...) the prospect of focussing on that which has gone rather than that which is to come may seem to be an impossible luxury. However, by reflecting upon my own teaching experiences I could quickly identify a variety of ways in which I could significantly improve my teaching. Consequently, I would suggest that for new lecturers, even small amounts of reflection could be very valuable. Also, even if your teaching assessments are not great to start with, being able to demonstrate the ability to respond to feedback and improve is also important. The key thing here is to follow Hay’s (2002; 2013) advice, and be organised enough to note down reflections as you have them. You can always conclude and prepare later ahead of teaching again.

7. GET SOME TRAINING

A critical step for those intending to develop a career as a teacher is to get some training. I found this to be useful on two levels. Simply being a student in a classroom environment again after years of post-graduate research enabled me to develop empathy with the situation of a student, and how things like poor organisation really affected my engagement with learning. Some teacher training also allowed me to develop a foundational understanding of key principles of modern teaching, of which ‘constructive alignment’, ‘graduate attributes’, and ‘sustainable assessments’ which are from my perspective as a nearly new lecturer worth highlighting.

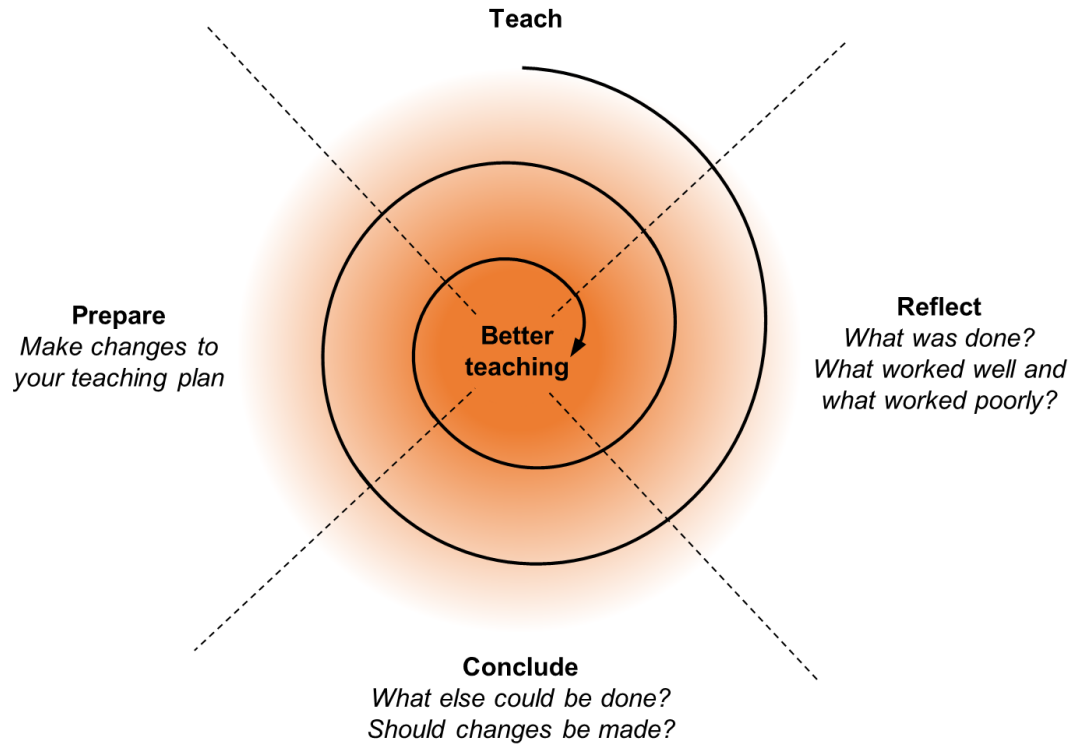


Figure 3. The teaching development spiral, which applies the principle of reflective practice to develop better teaching practice.

Constructive alignment (Biggs, 2014) breaks teaching design down into a series of discrete stages: define the intended learning outcomes, identify teaching/learning activities to support the intended learning outcomes, design assessment tasks that assess the teaching/learning activities and hence the intended learning outcomes, and use the outcome of the assessment tasks to create final grades. As a new lecturer, understanding the principle of constructive alignment has given me a framework within which to design my own courses, but perhaps more importantly, to argue that existing courses that I have inherited need to be updated or changed.

There is a growing importance being given to helping students develop graduate attributes as part of their studies. Graduate attributes refer to more general skills and attitudes that students are expected to develop along with discipline specific knowledge and skills (Chalmers and Partridge, 2013). For example, it is important to recognise that once students have finished their education, they will be applying skills and ideas where they will have to judge for themselves the value of their and others work. To address this, teachers could incorporate sustainable assessments into the learning process (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). For instance, using an exam as an assessment process only teaches students how to take an exam, which is not a very useful skill beyond academia. But if an assessment could be based on self and peer review and/or reflection then completing this assessment task would actually help to develop graduate attributes useful beyond academia (Chalmers and Partridge, 2013).

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