

## Guidelines for Engaging Students – The First Class

In the first encounter you have with your students, be it online or on-campus, it is important to welcome students, to introduce yourself, your module and your expectations of the students. In order to engage students from the outset, it is important that you appear enthusiastic and interested in the module and in the students and their learning experience, that you are organised and that you are in control of the learning environment and the technology. Even if all your teaching will be on-campus, it is important to continue to use the virtual learning environment (VLE) to supplement your teaching. Further, how your module site is structured, laid out and organised for your students on the VLE from the beginning is also very important. These first impressions can be nearly impossible to reverse or undo, making these first encounters extremely important.

- First year students typically have little knowledge of what it is like to be a university student and how this differs from their previous experience of education. While the First Seven Weeks initiative and this [Digital Learning Student Resource Pack](#) provide lots of information and support for students, it is also important for lecturers to acknowledge and address some issues that may remain and may be relevant to students' successful engagement in the module. Communicating and building a professional rapport with the students you are teaching will be critical during this type of learning experience. There are a myriad opportunities and means to accomplish this in the online environment as laid out in this [Building Rapport in the Online Teaching Space](#) guidelines. This equally stands for blended teaching, for example, the need for self-management and motivation in attending lectures and managing deadlines and study, the importance of engaging with the university environment and also information on the various avenues and supports that exist to help the student to adjust to university life and this often-self-directed learning experience.
- In relation to introducing your own module, present the learning outcomes of the module. Highlight the *What's in it for me* from the student perspective. Explain the value of the module and where it fits in the semester and within the overall programme. A graphic can be useful to illustrate this showing how the modules link together. If each course team member does this, students can be very clear on how each module may inform the next.
- Students will want to know the answers to the following questions and so a commentary on your module outline and some time spent discussing the following is important:
  - What is the added value of attending your lectures?
  - What can they expect in terms of the learning experience for the module?
  - What is online? What is on-campus?
  - What are your contact hours and what is the best way to contact you with questions? On your module site, set out clear times of day, and days each week, when you will be available online.
  - What do you expect from the students? It is worth explaining very explicitly your expectations in relation to attendance, participation, course work and submission ground rules at this stage and your rationale for these and any support you can give in this regard.
  - What does the student need to do in order to perform really well in this module?
- It can be useful to follow up with a group question on what students expect from you and explore these at this first lecture. For example, asking questions can really engage the

students. For example, *what goals/expectations do you have for this module? What have you heard about this module? Have you any concerns at this point?*

- You can take this a step further and agree a learning contract between you, the lecturer, and the students. This learning contract (Hunt & Chalmers, 2012:30) can include the following elements:
  - student expectations of the module
  - student expectations of their classmates
  - student expectations of the lecturer
  - student commitment to attendance, participation, reading, etc
  - student concerns about the module and how s/he will deal with these concerns.

This can be shared on the VLE or emailed to the students afterwards. A good example is that by Jeffrey Pfeffer (2010) who provides his students with a very comprehensive course outline including his expectations and deliverables:

‘Teaching is what I do, learning is what you do. One way of understanding my job is that I am in the role of your “personal trainer.” I will do my best to make available to you the tools—the readings, a classroom environment conducive to learning and to candid discussion and other materials—that I hope will motivate you and encourage you to learn the material. But learning is **your** responsibility. Moreover, it is **your** responsibility to decide what is important for you to learn and retain, and how best to do that. For that reason, you will find few, if any, handouts being distributed to summarize the class sessions or other such aids such as summaries of readings or texts. This is not a briefing, a lecture, or a presentation, it is a course. When you subsequently need to put the material of this course into practice, you probably won’t have the notes, handouts, the books, or me or my colleagues sitting nearby. It is, therefore, my hope that you will work to *internalize* the learning, ideas, and the feelings and beliefs about power and influence that you develop during this course.’

- Knowing and using your student names is very useful in engaging students and can reduce a feeling of isolation and anonymity, creating a more comfortable learning. For practical tips and insights on ways to enhance interaction during live online classes, [view this webinar recording](#)
- Students should see the value of your module in how you set the context using a relevant problem or example and possibly link the content to a personal research/interests/news story etc. Drawing on students own experiences can encourage participation and engagement while also varying the activities within your class.

*Ultimately, you want to ensure that attendance at your classes will reinforce the point that simply having a copy of your lecture notes is no substitute for lecture attendance. Students will see the added value of attending your class – what would they miss if they didn’t attend? How much catch up would be involved?*