Creating a dynamic learning environment

The quality of your teaching relies on your ability to structure and design class activities that are engaging and support student learning. The range of activities you use should accommodate all learning styles and encourage students to assume responsibility for their learning. You can create a dynamic and flexible learning environment that accommodates individual learning needs by using interactive activities. Such activities should provide students with opportunities to share ideas, test their thinking and examine different perspectives on issues. If you are teaching offshore it is important to consider how culture influences the way students may respond to different classroom activities. It is also important that you integrate local content and examples that will be relevant to and meet the needs and interests of local students.

How can I do this?

To ensure activities are relevant and achieve optimal student engagement and learning, when designing learning activities consider:

- The course and lesson objectives, and learning outcomes
- The cultural characteristics and diversity of the student group.
- The subject matter – this will influence the extent to which teaching activities are appropriate.
- The size of the class and the facilities and resources available to conduct activities.

Course and lesson objectives

When considering which activities to use in a lesson it is important to ensure the activity is relevant, learner-centred and will contribute to achieving the lesson and course objectives. When designing classroom activities you should articulate how the learning outcomes link to lesson objectives.

Cultural characteristics and diversity of the student group

The activities used in a lesson and course should be designed to accommodate the diversity of your student. It is useful to get to know your students and their cultural sensitivities and modify classroom activities accordingly. Cultural aspects that may impact on the effectiveness of classroom activities include:

- Attitudes towards teachers and authority.
- Gender, perceived differences in seniority or student status.
• Collectivism and low tolerance for uncertainty.
• Saving face.

**Attitudes towards teachers & authority**

Students may come to a university classroom having limited experience of student-centered learning. Your students may regard you as the expert and are therefore unlikely to challenge your views. RMIT’s student-centred approach may feel strange and confusing to some students when they begin an RMIT program. As a result, trying to engage students in a class discussion that involves critical thinking, and challenges to your ideas, may be difficult.

**Gender & perceived differences in seniority or student status**

In some university classrooms it may be common for female students to defer to males. If the student group is made up of mature-age professional students they may defer to a student who holds a senior position in an organisation. The implications are that some students may be reluctant to express their views before the more ‘senior’ or male students have expressed theirs. Students may be hesitant to present a contradictory view. By thoughtfully structuring activities teachers can still engage all students. In a group discussion you might group all the men or students of high status together so everyone can freely contribute to a small group discussion.

**Collectivism**

Many cultures have a collectivist orientation. Students might be more comfortable working together to form a collective view on a topic and present the thoughts of the group rather than express their own individual thoughts.

**Low tolerance for uncertainty**

Some societies tend to have a low tolerance for uncertainty. In the classroom this means students will like to know exactly what is expected of them. It also means they might prefer routines over surprises. If you plan to use new and innovative activities that may be different from anything they have experienced, you should think carefully about how you will prepare students.

**Saving face**

A person’s image or status within a social structure, or face, is an important aspect in many cultures. In the classroom the fear of losing face might arise when students do not understand your instructions or explanation, which can result in their reluctance to ask questions.

**Other considerations**

It is important to vary activities to accommodate the individual student learning styles.

In order to present a class using a student-centred approach that accommodates student diversity:

• Decide how students will best learn a new piece of information or skill rather than simply concentrating on how you will present it.
• Design activities carefully to engage students’ curiosity, enthusiasm and participation.
Subject matter

The subject matter being taught will influence the choice of teaching method and the suitability of learning activities. For example, while knowledge-based courses may be best presented through lectures and discussions, skills-based topics may be more effective if presented through experiential activities and narrative.

Class size, facilities and resources

When selecting activities it is important to consider the logistics. For example, you may need to consider whether there will enough students to conduct an activity, or there may be too many students to make the activity effective. It is also important to consider whether the activity is viable given the room/s and equipment available.

Examples of learning activities

A range of learning activities is necessary to engage students in learning and to appeal to different learning styles. Common activities include in-class discussions, demonstrations, case studies, debates, small group work, quizzes and simulations.

There are hundreds of useful resources that can provide you with ideas to optimise learning. You may also find that your teaching colleagues may have useful ideas and suggestions for tried and tested activities. With experience you can modify and adapt activities to suit your classes and your teaching style.

The following list of popular teaching methods and classroom activities is adapted from Honolulu University Teaching Tips Index. This list also provides comments on the strengths and limitations of each method and the preparation required.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Preparation required</th>
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| Lecture with discussion | Involves audience at least after the lecture  
Audience can question, clarify & challenge | Time may limit discussion period  
Quality is limited by quality of questions and discussion | Requires that questions be prepared prior to discussion |
| Panel of Experts      | Allows experts to present different opinions  
Can provoke better discussion than a one person discussion  
Frequent change of speaker keeps attention from lagging | Experts may not be good speakers  
Personalities may overshadow content  
Subject may not be in logical order | Facilitator coordinates focus of panel, introduces and summarizes briefs panel |
| Guest Speakers        | Personalises the topic  
Breaks down audience's stereotypes | May not be a good speaker | Contact speakers and coordinate appropriately |
| Brainstorming         | Listening exercise that allows creative thinking for new ideas  
Encourages full participation because all ideas equally recorded  
Draws on group's knowledge and experience  
Spirit of congeniality can be created  
One idea can spark off other ideas | Can be unfocused  
Needs to be limited to 5 - 7 minutes  
People may have difficulty getting away from known reality  
If not facilitated well, criticism and evaluation may occur | Facilitator selects issue  
Must have some ideas if group needs to be stimulated |
| Video                | Entertaining way of teaching content and raising issues  
Keeps group's attention  
Looks professional  
Stimulates discussion | Can raise too many issues to have a focused discussion  
Discussion may not have full participation  
Only as effective as following discussion | Need to set up equipment  
Effective only if facilitator prepares questions to discuss after the show |
| Class Discussion      | Pools ideas and experiences from group  
Effective after a presentation, film or experience that needs to be analysed  
Allows everyone to participate in an active process | Not practical with more than 20 people  
Few people can dominate  
Others may not participate  
Is time consuming  
Can get off the track | Requires careful planning by facilitator to guide discussion  
Requires question outline |
| Small Group Discussion | Allows participation of everyone  
People often more comfortable in small groups  
Can reach group consensus | Needs careful thought as to purpose of group  
Groups may get side tracked | Needs to prepare specific tasks or questions for group to answer |
| Case Studies          | Develops analytic and problem solving skills  
Allows for exploration of solutions for complex issues  
Allows student to apply new knowledge and skills | People may not see relevance to own situation  
Insufficient information can lead to inappropriate results | Case must be clearly defined in some cases  
Case study must be prepared |
| Role Plays            | Introduces problem situation dramatically  
Provides opportunity for people to assume roles of others and thus appreciate another point of view  
Allows for exploration of solutions  
Provides opportunity to practice skills | People may be too self-conscious  
Not appropriate for large groups  
People may feel threatened | Teacher has to define problem situation and roles clearly  
Teacher must give very clear instructions |
| Report Back Sessions  | Allows for large group discussion of role plays, case studies, and small group exercise  
Gives people a chance to reflect on experience  
Each group takes responsibility for its operation | Can be repetitive if each small group says the same thing | Teacher has to prepare questions for groups to discuss |
| Questionnaires / Surveys | Allows people to think for themselves without being influenced by others  
Individual thoughts can then be shared in large group | Can be used only for short period of time | Facilitator has to prepare handouts |
Useful resources

Support is available from your Deputy Head of School (Learning & Teaching) or equivalent. Your College Academic Development Group or learning & teaching specialist can also provide advice, support and professional development.

A Community of Practice - you may find your peers can provide you with invaluable ideas for activities they have successfully used in a transnational setting.

RMIT’s “Coffee and Cookies: Conversations on Good Teaching - Motivating Students and Stimulating Their Interest” is based on actual “conversations” with RMIT lecturers from 44 courses who shared their time and teaching experiences as part of the CES Analysis Project.

RMIT’s Inclusive teaching practices (curriculum, assessment and cultural diversity) provides a useful list covering a range of topics relating to student differences and engagement. http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/inclusive

Student-centred learning – provides a useful checklist to determine if your approach to teaching is student-centred:

101 Things You Can Do the First Three Weeks of Class is an excellent compilation of resources that includes “suggestions for college teachers who are looking for a fresh way of creating the best possible environment for learning.”
http://www.uvu.edu/retention/practices/101_THINGS_YOU_CAN_DO_2006_1_.pdf

The University of Oregon’s Teaching Effectiveness includes links to resources on various topics related to teaching methods:
http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/index.html

Teaching tips Index -Honolulu University
http://www2.honolulu.hawaii.edu/facdev/guidebk/teachtip/teachtip.htm

RMIT’s video series “Perspectives on Learning and Teaching” presents short vignettes about student-centred learning, learner diversity, student engagement and preparing to teach:

References


http://search.proquest.com/docview/217960231/fulltextPDF?accountid=13552


Zepke, N & Leach, L 2010, ‘Improving student engagement: ten proposals for action’, Active Learning in Higher Education, 11 (3), pp 167-177. The online version of this article can be found at: http://alh.sagepub.com/content/11/3/167