

**STEPPING UP TO TEACHING IN BUSINESS:
UNDERSTANDING TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS FOR SMALL CLASSES**

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Abstract

This article provides those teaching in small classes in an Australian tertiary environment with some recommendations on how to get started and tips for effective teaching. The focus of the advice is on small class teaching, which is generally comprised of less than 30 students. The tips presented are centred on being organised, understanding your content and your students, generating engagement and norms for participation, as well as investing in adaptable skill development. A seven step process to teaching effectiveness is reviewed. These tips provide teachers with foundational knowledge that can be transferred to large classes teaching.

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1. Introduction

The teaching environment as we know it is rapidly changing, together with the nature of the students that we teach and expectations that we seek to fulfil. Students have higher expectations, access content in diverse ways and demand a different teaching style. Accordingly, the role of the teacher has evolved from primarily being a deliverer of content to now one of facilitating knowledge creation. Despite these environmental shifts, the core elements of learning remain unchanged: students seek a connection to the teacher, peers and content. They seek relevant learning and complex material communicated in a clearly digestible manner.

The aim of this paper is to provide teachers with advice as to how to prepare the foundations for effective teaching in a small class environment. The advice is relevant to new and experienced teachers. The small class environment is the focus of this article. It is mostly comprised of a tutorial, small seminar or workshop, with less than thirty students, whose focus is on application of content rather than its dissemination.

This article is based on over twenty years of my teaching experience of business subjects in small (and large) class sizes. Across this period, the teaching environment evolved from a dependency on blackboards to engage students to whiteboards and smartboards, from transparencies to PowerPoints, butchers paper to flip charts, and now a plethora of educational apps and online programs and tools. The contemporary teacher needs to constantly adapt to the changing environment and student learning. The article provides a review of good teaching, then provides some tips on building the foundations for effective teaching practice. A step approach to teaching is then presented together with tips on how to focus attention to the classroom. A few final words of advice are then offered.

2. What Drives Effective Teaching? Building the Foundations for Effective Teaching Practice

So what makes a good teacher? To answer this, we need to examine what drives effective teaching in tutorials, small seminars or workshops (referred to simply from this point forward as 'the classroom'). Classrooms are unique teaching environments. Usually comprised of between 10 to 25

students, these settings enable a teacher to familiarise themselves with student needs, engage them with content, and engage in adaptive learning. Teachers must be equipped with the skills to adapt to the learning skills of the students. Basic training and a sense of efficacy are essential mechanisms to achieve this.

2.1 Teaching Beliefs

Teachers need to be cognisant of their teaching beliefs and be trained to teach. Tutors, workshop leaders and seminar leaders will all be referred to as teachers from this point forward to simplify references to these individuals in this article. “A teacher’s efficacy belief is a judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Tschannen-Morana and Woolfolk Hoyb, 2001: 783). Teachers with high levels of efficacy are shown to be better at planning their classes, are more willing to engage in teaching innovations to address student need and work more with students to assist their learning. In time, this helps to improve student learning outcomes and the student and teacher experience (Allinder, 1994). Moreover, this research shows that teacher attitudes towards training and the belief that they have control over student outcomes has a positive effect on student learning (Bandura, 1977). This same research shows how training can have a positive influence on changing attitudes, as well as teacher sense of influence over student learning. Most teachers are not aware of their sense of efficacy despite these beliefs playing a large role in learning outcomes. It is a good starting point for someone new to teaching to reflect on how much influence they can potentially have on student outcomes.

Reflection: Are you aware of your teaching philosophy? Are you confident of your ability to influence student learning? The answers to these questions will affect your attitude in the classroom, so it is a good idea to reflect on where you stand.

2.2 Training in Teaching

Training is needed to keep educators current with the latest teaching innovations, technology, skill development and environmental shifts that impact on their curriculum development and teaching effectiveness (as assessed via student learning). Training provides some essential basics for teaching and affects teacher confidence and attitudes in the classroom. Basic skills are needed to provide teachers with an ability to adapt to a diverse student cohort that they may encounter across different classes. For instance, one class of students may be incredibly loud and difficult to keep on track, whereas another may be so quiet that it is challenging to get them to answer questions. Training equips tutors with skills to adapt to these diverse settings and address the challenges ahead. Indeed, Gibbs and Coffey (2004) empirically showed a positive relationship between trained teachers and their approach to teaching and learning. They showed unequivocally that training programs were important to improve teaching skills and adaptability in the classroom, as well as reorienting a teacher's focus to enhancing the student experience. The same was not found for teachers who had not engaged in training.

Universities often contain students from a diversity of nationalities and cultures. Training therefore is essential for teachers to learn how to create safe and engaging classrooms in which students from a diverse range of backgrounds can work together efficiently and collegially (Otten 2003). Cultural awareness training serves a number of purposes: (1) to enable teachers to assist students to overcome impediments to well-being; (2) to develop positive and respectful relationships between students in the classroom; (3) assist students in their learning and (4) assist people to effectively deal with any challenges that may present themselves in the classroom from students not understanding diverse cultural norms (Mohrman, Ma, and Baker, 2008).

While some faculties invest heavily in teacher training to improve the student and teacher experience (such as the Faculty of Business and Economics at the University of Melbourne), not all universities do. So teachers need to be able to proactively seek out training opportunities to at least build some foundational skills to assist adaptation and resilience to the evolving teaching environment.

2.3 Student-Focused Teaching

Student-focused teachers provide a more comfortable atmosphere for their students. These teachers are able to achieve a deep level of learning. This enables students to engage more with learning materials and in the classroom. This further enables the students to retain concepts and subject content more effectively. In addition, more engaged students tend to have superior learning outcomes, and a more nuanced understanding of material covered in class. New generation students expect student-centred learning which exploits new learning environments and applies the latest teaching innovations (Howe and Strauss, 2000).

3. Step Up to Teaching in a Dynamic Environment

While the teaching environment is increasingly dynamic and complex, there are a few core elements that all teachers need to address when teaching, especially for smaller classes. These approaches are all founded on evidence-based teaching approaches, as well as my personal experience. I have detailed these in a few straightforward steps.

Step 1: Determine your teaching style.

How much are you influenced by those who taught you before? Do you apply a directive or non-directive teaching style? Directive teaching styles tend to be centred on teacher-directed, traditional teaching methods. In contrast, non-directive teaching styles tend to be student-centred, and progressive. Research shows that non-directive teaching styles generally lead to better student learning outcomes, including grade point average (GPA) (eg. Tuckman, 1968; Souster 1982). If employing a non-directive teaching style, the focus would be on adopting the best approach to address student needs. This engaging approach would recognise for instance, that the average attention span of a student (being only seven minutes) would require short activity bursts to enhance discussions and engagement in the classroom. This is essential for students to assist them with information retention in the short term and for the transfer of information into their memory in the long term (Baker, Matulich & Papp, 2007; Oblinger, 2005).

Step 2: Be prepared.

Effective teachers structure their classes with appropriate lesson plans so they know how much they can comfortably cover in class without rushing through the session. The content, activities and opportunity for feedback is structured into time blocks prior to the session. This helps the teacher to feel more prepared and more confident in the class as there is a plan to draw from. Related to this is the need for the teacher to be familiar with and knowledgeable of the subject content that is being taught. An understanding of subject content allows a teacher to explain things in a number of diverse ways to address student learning and “think on their feet”. So, if one example does not resonate with a student, the teacher may draw on his/her knowledge to source another way to explain the same concept or draw on a bank of diverse examples to exemplify the concept. These skills are essential for effective teaching. People think in diverse ways. Accordingly, we often need to explain the same thing differently to connect with a diverse cross-section of students and aid their learning.

Step 3: Build a rapport with your students.

This requires you to establish a comfortable environment where students will openly communicate and thrive in their learning. Student outcomes will drive the teaching approach. A rapport creates a positive environment for students characterised by empathy and interactions between teacher and student. As asserted by Campbell and colleagues (2003), teachers can leave a positive first impression with their students and provide constructive feedback within class to match the student needs (not only after an official piece of assessment). This helps to influence positive student attitudes that act as motivators for their learning and performance (as reflected through their grades) (Wilson, Wilson and Legg, 2014). This rapport even extends into email correspondence, which we revisit later.

The first day of class therefore becomes critical in setting your students’ expectations of you and your expectations of them. At a minimum, a teacher needs to review the syllabus, assessment requirements, participation expectations in class, commencement and completion of class expectations and respecting peers in the classroom.

Your manner, how you present yourself, how you establish respect between peers in the classroom, how you communicate and reinforce your expectations of student work in the classroom, all contribute towards the formation of these expectations. Being prepared (discussed later) is essential to setting the tone of your classes and establishing your reputation as a teacher.

Many things will impact on the class atmosphere across the semester, including learning student names (or using name tags/cards), your communications with students in the classroom and via email (immediacy, content and tone all impact student impressions and experience of the subject) and frequency of assessment tasks. Students seek a sense of connection with the teacher and a need to have an identity in class.

Step 4: Use technology to boost learning

Technology has come a long way from the humble computer. There are now a plethora of technologies and online learning tools to enhance engagement with content to allow students to apply material and enhance their learning. Technology can be used in its simplest form, such as a data projector in class, to a more sophisticated use by enabling app use in class on mobile devices. Audience participation apps (such as Kahoot <https://kahoot.com/> or Poll Everywhere <https://www.polleverywhere.com/>) are simple and quick tools that allow a teacher to gauge immediate feedback to determine if the content is being understood by the student. It is important however that the technology selection decision is always guided by the student learning outcomes and the availability/accessibility of the tool so as to not disadvantage any students in class. Diverse techniques need not dominate the class but when applied occasionally have been shown to facilitate engagement levels and also provide feedback (Poirer and Feldman 2014). Technology can also be integrated into off campus learning to assist students in their study habits (such as online quizzes to track knowledge progress). Web 2.0 tools (encompassing blogs, wikis and social networking tools) can assist students to collaborate among themselves or with the teacher.

Step 5: Make Classes Interesting and Memorable

If we reflect on our own experience as students, we can often pinpoint the classes that we did not enjoy or learn from. We may also be able to identify the reasons as to why. A few basic precepts guide good teaching yet, as indicated earlier, preparation is crucial. It allows a teacher to structure a class so that information is well organised. Content should be easily presentable. A teacher should be knowledgeable of the content and know the general structure that will be followed for the allocated time. Any presentations of content by a teacher should be kept to a minimum in a tutorial, workshop or seminar format. Students should be challenged and supported. Flipping a classroom has long been used by teachers placing the onus of the learning responsibility on the student. This was before the term 'flipped classroom' was widely used. In a business school, this often takes places, for example, when case-based teaching is applied. Students may receive the content in a face-to-face or online lecture, read some background articles and the case study prior to class and arrive to the classroom with the analysis of the case prepared and ready to discuss.

To avoid student boredom, and make a class more interesting, the method of delivery should vary so that students are not bored. Some material could be delivered using humour, other through a guest presenter, or a video, television/movie clip demonstrating a learning outcome or even an audio grab. This will be dependent on your teaching style (See Step 1), subject matter and your level of comfort/confidence. Teachers could engage students in activities to engage them with content. The activities can vary between group work tasks, flip chart presentations, incorporating technology into the classroom such as Poll Everywhere, Kahoot, Padlet and so forth, to diversify tools to stimulate in-class interest. This diversity makes the class less predictable. Creating a dynamic environment for discussion also sets norms for participation and may motivate students to prepare before class. All of these assist in making a class and the material covered more memorable and enhances long term learning outcomes.

We often hear teachers lament that their class material is predetermined by another lead teacher or coordinator. A subject coordinator may have prepared content that he/she would like all teachers to use, but this does not preclude the teacher to vary the delivery mode to suit one's teaching

style and/or presentation strengths. This also ensures that student boredom and loss of interest can be avoided which can have a negative impact on student learning outcomes (Oblinger 2005). This diversity in pedagogical practices can also assist in the achievement of student-centred learning (discussed previously), where the learning experience is learner-centred and more personal for students.

So, consider the next specific example of a tutorial, where a tutor may be provided with content, such as preassigned questions, that need to be covered in class. Many assume that the content needs to be simply ‘delivered’ to the students, however, this does not imply that there should be minimal engagement. On the contrary, questions could be assigned to the student groups to discuss. Students could be asked to write solutions to mathematical problems on the whiteboard or flipcharts and then work through the solution via a class presentation. This enables the tutor to adopt a facilitator role (rather than a pseudo lecturer role). The tutor can flag problem areas (if any) and the students have an opportunity to apply their knowledge and enhance the potential of retaining their knowledge in the longer term. This becomes a much more engaging environment for the student and if the environment is informal, they will be comfortable to raise areas of concern directly with the tutor within class.

Step 6: Select appropriate supplementary material to enhance student learning.

It also becomes imperative that students are provided with supplementary material to diversify how they acquire knowledge. Not everyone learns in the same way (see for example Mayer, 2002). Some students are more aural while others rely on reading text to capture information. So it is important that supplementary material is delivered in a diversity of ways to suit varied learning styles. Using video grabs, audio capture, and pictorial representations of material all can target diverse learning needs of a very different cohort of students. These should complement any set readings. It is also important that the supplementary material be drawn into class discussions to assist in making the content relevance clear to the students and enhance student learning.

Step 7: Document your teaching effectiveness.

Most teachers don't document their teaching but the most effective teachers periodically document their practice, reflect on it and engage in continual improvement. Teachers often tend to perceive themselves as being more effective than they really are (see, for example, Halonen and colleagues, 2012). So be vigilant in obtaining student and peer feedback to gain an independent perspective of your effectiveness, regardless of the size of your class. While student evaluations are usually the systematically collected data from a university, staff can also be proactive in seeking feedback and engage in self-assessment of their teaching. This is important to establish how they are perceived relative to other teachers in the department as well as their students.

Peer feedback is increasingly being regarded as a significant source of feedback, particularly if it is conducted by a supervisor or senior peer who is also an effective teacher. It can provide a teacher with another perspective of what is being clearly communicated, if the teacher is maintaining eye contact with students, encouraging engagement in the classroom, equally calling on student participation across the cohort, and so on. This process assists in developing reflective practice and teaching improvements. It could also contribute to the composition of a teaching portfolio to track and evidence long-term impact of one's teaching.

A teaching portfolio is generally considered as evidence of teaching effectiveness that a teacher builds over time. This portfolio allows a teacher to collate his/her contributions to teaching. This may include student evaluations, critical reviews, assessment results, interpretation of student evaluations, awards, scholarship of teaching, case studies, text book contributions, and so on. While many debate the utility of student feedback, it does have the potential to provide a teacher with student reflections on what they understood to be clearly communicated from a teacher. So it could provide teaching insights that were previously unknown and lead to useful improvements to teaching practice.

4. Understanding the Role of Engagement

When designing a class, teachers need to consider how they will engage their students and which strategies will best assist in achieving the learning outcomes being sought. Most of what was discussed previously assumes that interactions will take place in some form. The core to learning is engagement, which takes place on three levels: (1) between students and (2) between students and the teacher and (3) between the student and content. Unlike lectures and online sources which convey content, the classroom is the key environment where application takes place for the student. Teachers are able to see how students have interpreted and understood content covered in lectures, readings and take-home tasks. If designed to be less than twenty students or so, a teacher should be able to gauge the extent of student knowledge and engage in adaptive learning. This would include a sense of what most students are quickly understanding and what others may be struggling with. This should allow the teacher to identify students that may be at risk (and assist them) as well as those who are high achieving students (and challenge them).

4.1 Diverting Attention “to” the Classroom

While the ‘digital native’ reference often used to describe today’s students is deemed contentious, there is no disputing that most students spend a considerable portion of their day online, downloading music, academic materials or browsing social media (Prensky 2001). At the same time, the teaching environment has changed and student attention is increasingly diverted to a plethora of other outlets including social media, apps and gadgets. It therefore becomes a challenge for the teacher to divert attention away from these devices and towards the classroom to generate engagement. Fortunately however, these same devices can be used quite effectively within the classroom to create a collegial, fun, engaging atmosphere and enhance student learning at the same time. Technology has played a large role in this and has made its presence increasingly known in the teaching environment. We know that tertiary education is rapidly changing and can benefit greatly through continuous improvement achieved through innovation and technology integration of digital

learning processes. This maximises learning outcomes also for the students (Matulich, Papp, and Haytko, 2008).

However, for this technology to be applied effectively and for many of these recommendations to work, teachers need to be trained and upskilled to be adaptable. In addition, the most effective ones are those that are empowered to engage in adaptive learning, and seek to understand student needs to make impromptu changes to classrooms. This may be as simple as being able to skip an assigned question or two to concentrate on addressing more pressing student needs. The solutions for the skipped questions could be provided online or through an alternate mechanism. Often course leaders would benefit substantially by allowing teachers at the forefront of student learning to have input into classroom (tutorial) design. They are often best placed to recommend strategies and design tools to maximise student engagement and learning outcomes.

5. Some Final Words of Advice

This article has reviewed the changing context of teaching in the tertiary sector and the attributes needed to be armed with the skills to adapt and change. It has iterated the need to respect your students and how this will garner their respect for you in return. Teaching students can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience. You need to be open to learning, listening to student feedback, seeking feedback from peers, taking note of the mood in the classroom and identifying if students are learning. Great teachers constantly change and improve their teaching, even when evaluations from students are high. Teacher efficacy can drive some of these positive student outcomes while others can be largely influenced by the training that teachers have engaged in. Great teachers engage in innovation and change and push the boundaries. But you need to start somewhere.

The “step up” approach was outlined as a process that encourages you to step up to the plate and apply a structured method to your teaching. This will allow you to build your skills and experience to be able to constantly change and respond to the changing student needs in your

classrooms. While these recommendations were presented in the context of small class teaching, all of the advice is also applicable to larger class environments.

Constant improvement is an underlying premise of good teaching. This entails being aware of your teaching practices and seeking feedback to determine where further enhancements can be made. It also allows one to take stock of what is working particularly well to garner engagement from students to maximise their learning outcomes. Finally, training and investment in professional development is key. Learning never stops: for neither the student nor the teacher. What better way to teach your students of the value of lifelong learning by demonstrating this through your own investment in professional development and diversity in teaching practice. That is the ultimate legacy of an effective teacher.

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