

Using *e*VALUate to improve student learning

7. Improving student perceptions of teaching quality

The seventh item in eVALUate asks students their level of agreement with this statement:

The quality of teaching in this unit helps me to achieve the learning outcomes.

Quality teaching occurs when knowledgeable and enthusiastic teaching staff interact positively with students in well organised teaching and learning experiences.

This document aims to assist teachers to provide excellent teaching in their units.

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To be a great teacher, 'you must love your subject, love your students and be utterly determined that they shall learn' (Williams, 2002).

'Sensibility and doing the hard intellectual yards are what makes a teacher great—and memorable' (Pringle, 2002)

1. What is quality teaching?

Quality teaching is doing whatever it takes ethically and responsibly to ensure that your students learn, and that they leave your unit with a passion for learning. Hopefully we have all had the experience of having at least one great teacher: chances are that you consider that teacher 'great' because he or she loved their subject, inspired you and challenged you to learn, and believed that you could achieve. They were possibly also enthusiastic, passionate about learning, and didn't take themselves too seriously. These ideas are explained more fully in the sections which follow. They are aimed at assisting teachers to be the best they can, and to ensure that students' learning experiences are positive.

2. Communicating your passion for your subject

It is likely that you teach in a university because you have expert knowledge, and because you have devoted yourself to acquiring that expertise because you love your subject. Needless to say, not all your students will share this level of enthusiasm for your subject—some will love the subject, others will be enrolled in it just because they have to be. Even so, you can attempt to enthuse even the most unwilling students by explaining to them the usefulness of what they are learning, and how it might apply to something which touches their lives. For example, units in writing skills and introductory statistics can be unattractive and challenging to some students. In subject areas such as those, you may need to provide real life examples which appeal to students' future goals (how to be able to write an effective job application), or to their sense of fun, or both (if you were at a party with fifty other people, what would be the probability of talking to a certain person of interest).

3. Communicating your knowledge

Be aware that being knowledgeable, and showing students that you are knowledgeable in your subject does not mean you have to be able to answer every question they may have. Nor does it mean you need to be able to communicate just your knowledge. As university teachers, it is also our role to communicate questions, to discover answers, and to challenge students to think. If you find yourself confronted with a question for which you do not have a ready answer, commit to finding out and letting students know, or setting a joint task with them to discover the answer. As university teachers we are expected to be researchers in our fields, and to be communicating our research findings—and questions—to our students. Your teaching is likely to be far more inspiring to students if you bring your research goals and findings to the students' learning experiences.

4. Interacting positively

Teaching, and being attentive and available to students is very demanding, and very tiring. Ensure that you set some time aside each teaching week to be available to students—advertise those times, and make sure you are available either in person, on the phone or online. Consider creating an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) list on your unit website so that students can find answers to common questions without necessarily having to ask you. Make all your unit information available at that site for students' convenience. Needless to say, all interactions with students must be constructive and positive, and in keeping with Curtin's *Guiding Ethical Principles* (see <http://www.policies.curtin.edu.au/documents/geps.doc>)

5. Being well-organised

Because students are novices in your subject area, they need structure and clear guidelines. You are required to provide every student with a clear, well organised unit outline which indicates what will occur in the unit, and when (and preferably why). You must inform students of assessment requirements, and you should avoid changing assessment requirements or teaching arrangements once the semester has begun. Expect students to be punctual, and be punctual yourself, giving plenty of notice if classes or meetings need to be cancelled. If you issue students with notes or handouts, ensure that they are professionally produced and have the same academic rigour (in referencing, for example) which you would expect from students.

As well as organising the entire unit, each teaching and learning session (face-to-face or online) will be easier for students if it is well structured. Start each session clearly outlining what the learning outcomes are for today's session. For example, tell the students that "this lecture is designed to help you to be able to understand xyz—by the end of today's class you should be able to do xyz". As the class proceeds, review these goals frequently, allow students to assess their progress, and then continue. Such obvious 'signposting' is particularly helpful for first year students.

6. Communicating clearly in face to face settings

In large face to face teaching settings, the rules of excellent public speaking apply (your lecture should not be a monologue!). Know your purpose (as above) and communicate that clearly to the students. Know your 'audience'—explain concepts in a way which will be understandable to your students. Use examples from their world if you can. Be aware that your students are likely to be from many countries and cultures—make sure comments and quips are understandable and inoffensive. Particularly in large venues, ensure you can be heard—project your voice to the back row. Check with your students that they can hear and see you properly. Speak slowly and clearly, and be aware that for some in your audience you will have an accent—even if you are a local. During the class, keep the students engaged: ask them if they understand, or which points are unclear. Give them the opportunity to interact with you and with each other—or reflect or work in silence—so that they have a chance to make meaning of what they have heard and seen. Modify your voice—change pace and tone to engage the audience. Move around the room if you can.

7. Being an inspirational teacher

Reflect on what it was, and is, that inspires you to pursue your learning in your subject, and try to emulate that for your students. Excellent learning is an engaging and positive experience. Relate your expertise to students' experiences, or to current events or dilemmas, and challenge them to discover.

8. Peer mentoring

Invite a critical friend and peer to comment on or review your teaching (this is called **peer feedback of teaching**) or to observe your teaching and provide you with supportive feedback (**peer observation of teaching**). **Peer feedback on teaching** is where colleagues can be invited to give feedback on non-classroom aspects of a staff member's approaches to teaching and learning. This might include the evaluation of unit documentation, teaching resources, appropriateness of assessment and so on. Staff from the Teaching Development Unit can provide you with guidelines on how to provide useful feedback on peer observations.

9. For further assistance

Teaching development staff are available for help with individuals or teams.

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Resources to help you

A range of resources to help you to develop strategies to improve items which have been identified as needing improvement, are available from the eVALUate website, or alternatively a hard copy can be forwarded to you by Terri Crowe (x2305 or T.Crowe@curtin.edu.au). Resources are available for each of the following items of the eVALUate questionnaire.

1. **Communicating clear learning outcomes**
2. **Creating engaging learning experiences**
3. **Creating effective learning resources**
4. **Assessing student achievement of learning outcomes**
5. **Providing feedback for student learning**
6. **Improving student perceptions of workload**
7. **Improving student perceptions of teaching quality**

List of references

Pringle, H. (2002, September 25). Best instructors stretch the mind. *Australian*, pp. 24-25.

Williams, B. (2002, September 25). Pedagogy has a place in the reformed university. *Australian*, p. 25.