## Teaching Strategies for New Environments

### Summary
As a lecturer you are sometimes faced with new teaching environments. Teaching in such spaces can be daunting and challenging especially if they are non-standard teaching spaces. Such spaces are designed for activity and engagement rather than conventional “lecture” format. The following guide offers some general advice to assist you when teaching in an unusual teaching space.

### Good teaching is more than teaching spaces
The skill of teaching is much more than the space in which teaching happens. The characteristics of high performing lecturers have little or nothing to do with teaching spaces. but rather have been consistently identified as the following:

- Enthusiasm
- Clear structure
- Clarity
- Voice tone and modulation
- Patience
- Encouragement of learning in students
- Using relevant examples and illustrations
- Good audience awareness and interaction (engagement).
- Using engaging visual material and relevant handouts

While some teaching spaces are not ideally suited to certain types of class, this should be seen as a challenge for a good teacher and not something that necessarily prevents good teaching.

Try to remember and focus on the key elements of good teaching in the list. Always ask yourself such questions as:

- Am I **engaging** the students? (Do they have tasks to do? Or questions to answer?)
- Am I being **enthusiastic**?
- Am I presenting in a **clear and well-structured** manner?

If you can focus on the things that you are in **control** of, the shape and layout of the room becomes less of a problem.
If you are confronted with very unconventional space consider the following techniques:

**Distinguish between Presentation Time and Activity Time**
As a lecturer you are in charge of the space and what students do there. Don’t be afraid of asking students to move their chairs to the front of the room if you have a conventional lecture to give. Ask them to then move them back if they are required to work in groups or at a computer terminal. A simple instruction such as:

- “OK, everyone bring/face your chairs to the front, or you will miss something important…”
- “Now, back to your groups to work on the XXY problem … We will reconvene as a large group in 15 minutes”

makes it clear that the class has a structure and purpose.

In general, students will be distracted by technology if they are placed in front of a computer screen. Computer time should be carefully monitored. If there is no good reason for students to be in front of a computer, they shouldn’t be.

**Set the Scene**
For example, you could tell your students at the first lecture that every class will typically have three parts:
- A short lecture or summary of the lecture in the front of the classroom.
- A period of activity in small groups using computers.
- A feedback session as a reconvened group at the front of the classroom.

You may even advise students when you do not wish to use part of the classroom (for example, in a class where the lecturer is in the centre of the room and cannot, without difficulty, face all students). A simple instruction might be needed:

“I’d like everybody to sit this side of the room for this class. Each week I want you to sit in the same locations unless I tell you otherwise”.

**Shuffle People Around**
Provide a list of students’ names at each desk prior to their arrival and ask them to sit in the assigned place. This will avoid the problem of “dead areas” (e.g., behind pillars) in the classroom. You can tell students where you want them to sit. You can also change the assignment of student groups every few
weeks, i.e., so student groups are regularly mixed. This will ensure that all students will concentrate on the tasks at hand, and be less likely to be distracted by their friends.

Fit the Presentation to the Room
One of the best ways to deal with a challenging teaching environment is to make sure that the nature of your class fits the surroundings and not the other way around.

- **Do not give conventional “lectures” in spaces not designed for the purpose.** Instead, set a problem for students to do and walk around monitoring their results. Talk to them in groups, or as a class from the back or side of the room. Note that in a fully occupied teaching space with a central console, it may be almost impossible for everyone to hear you if you speak from the centre of the room.

- **Never use a central console as a security blanket.** In non-standard teaching spaces, it is more important than ever to walk around maintaining eye contact with every student in the room. Walk away from the console in different directions. Return to the console only to adjust your presentation slides. Make sure that everyone in the room feels “included” in the presentation.

- **Make the students give presentations.** Nothing is more likely to promote engagement in students than the knowledge that “they” have to present their findings to the class in 15 minutes! Allow opportunities to prevent the class from focusing on you all the time. This is a good technique for all classrooms, but it is particularly important in non-standard teaching spaces.

- **Assign class monitors.** In a non-conventional teaching space, assign monitors in each student group, i.e., student 1 from group A has to work with group B as well as his own group A, etc. The monitor has to report back to the whole group what the two groups are doing. Remember that non-standard spaces are designed for activity and engagement. Students should be walking around the room frequently and there should be lots of talk and discussion.

- **Set competitions.** One of the best ways to ensure engagement among students is to design a competition where groups compete for a “prize”. Students may be allowed to ask questions of other groups to gauge their progress, but have to work independently in their own group.

- **Set time limits.** Similarly, all activities in a non-standard teaching space should be given a deadline. This ensures that the teaching space itself becomes less distracting.
Students become more task driven if they “have” to finish by a certain time.

**Familiarise yourself with your room and technology**

Familiarise yourself with what’s in the room and how to best utilize the resources available. Be prepared. Always check lecture theatres assigned to you and how they’re set up, their seating capacity, multimedia equipment available, and so on. Make it a habit to check your room before your first day of lecture and your class list. Think about how you can organise students effectively in the room whether you have 20 or 200 students.

With consoles, make sure you know how to operate them. You do not want to waste your time figuring out technology while your class is already in session or lose extra minutes by calling IT for help. There’s nothing more reassuring knowing which buttons to press. This is particularly useful when you wish to dim the lights such as when you wish to show a video; lower the blinds on a very bright daylight; or turn off the projector to move to a discussion-based lecture. If you’re bringing in your own laptop, make sure you can connect it to the PC and project it onto the screen. If you intend to use web-based videos (e.g., YouTube), make sure there is internet connection in the room.

If you wish to use the Faculty’s shared drive and access your presentations and files from there, be sure to check your drive is “mapping” onto the computer. It does happen that not every PC, once logged in, is able to show the network drive you use. Check with the IT if your network drive is not mapping on the room’s PC. **Always have a plan B.** If it doesn’t map, bring a memory stick.

If you use smartboards, do not simply use them as PowerPoint projection screens! They can be useful in many ways such as doing drag-and-drop activities, games, note-taking, or using them as interactive worksheets. You can even advance your PowerPoint slides by tapping onto them.

**Learn design features of a space**

Take a proactive approach in understanding what your space offers. Most new environments have been designed to focus on group experience, supporting **interaction between and within groups.** In one learning space for example, students can work in groups in round tables, connect to the internet using their workstations, and write their thoughts on dedicated whiteboards. Imagine what experiences you can create with all or combinations of these - certainly better than sitting and listening!
Examine the space as a place for learning in terms of its ‘socio-spatial’ qualities (Jamieson, 2007) - its capacity, layout, group ‘zones’, break out spaces, demonstration areas, proximity to you and other students, physical access, intimacy, versatility and so on.

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<th>Teach students to manage technology</th>
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<td>Now that you have an understanding of the technology in your classroom and how the space is organised, share that with your students. You might ask them to do presentations. Teaching them the tools available to them for use encourages them to be creative. This also develops their presentation skills enabled by technology. Thus try and allow some student control of key facilities.</td>
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<th>Use round tables effectively</th>
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<td>Round tables offer more opportunities for engagement than traditional tables and chairs. Round tables can change the relationship you have with your students and the relationship that students have with one another (Educause, 2010). Students automatically group themselves with these round tables and, allowing them to face each other, open opportunities for them to discuss. Make sure you roam around these tables. Be with your students from time to time. If you asked them to do a specific task and discuss amongst themselves, move around each table. Sit together with them in every table and answer any questions. Avoid students feeling “left out”.</td>
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<th>Be sure you have all students in your vision</th>
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<td>As mentioned earlier, there are dead areas in some classrooms that prevent you from seeing everyone. Avoid these from your angle of view. Move students to other seats. Some spaces in the Faculty have rows of seats with PCs. Others look like old cinemas! As lecturers usually stand next to the table located in the middle of the room next to the projection area, it can be difficult to see other students from the corners of the room. It can also be difficult to see students when your view is obscured by computers. Move your students to the centre rows in order for you to see all of them and for them to see you, even while they’re working with computers. Move around while speaking and maintain eye contact to areas of the room.</td>
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<th>Think about all that you need</th>
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<td>You might only have a few students yet find yourself in a large theatre or classroom. Think about all that you need to run the class more effectively by considering the following:</td>
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<td>• Only use a few of the resources available. Do not force yourself to use all boards, OHPs and other equipment as this</td>
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can be impractical. Examine your goals and match those with the most appropriate resources you’ll need.

- For a room with tables, you might only need to use one or two tables. Arrange these as close to you as possible in order to maintain eye contact with everyone.
- Check if you need a microphone. New premises in the Faculty have built-in microphones on top of the desk. Disable/Enable when necessary. Be aware too on how well your voice is picked up when you move away from it at a certain distance.

**Take a tour or enrol in a training program**

Be sure to check with your Faculty, The Learning Environments office, or the IT office as they usually provide a tour and/or training for you to become familiar with learning spaces around the university, particularly on the technology that is available. Ask about their design aspects and why they’re configured that way. Take advantage of any training program that might be useful for you. Do not be pressured to use technology but only use those that are right for you and your students.

**Take a tour yourself.** Whether you’re new to the Faculty or not, examining your classroom(s) in advance can make you feel more comfortable when using them.

**Take your first weeks seriously**

Make the necessary preparations for your first few weeks by ensuring you are familiar with your teaching environment. Here’s a couple of things to consider:

- **First impressions last.** You do not want to look so surprised and embarrassed when you find yourself having problems with your room. So make a good impression on your first weeks’ lectures. Show you are in control.
- **Plan tasks that suit your room.** You might have been all too ready to do a small group task on the first day only to find out the room has no round tables to allow this more effectively. Are you planning on a whole-class presentation? Student presentations? Working in groups? Therefore plan how you would run your class by taking into consideration the setup of your room.
- **Get to know a few students.** Arrive early on your first day and welcome students at the door. Learn a few names (it’s best to start this during the first weeks). Over the years, there’s been a significant decline in the proportion of first year students that feel that they are known by name by at least one teacher (James, Krause, & Jennings 2010),
affecting their sense of belonging. Show an interest in them and find out a little bit about them and their groups.

- **Build a sense of community**: Make them feel that they are part of your class. Show genuine concern for understanding their learning needs.
- Provide an opportunity for them to ask questions. You need not talk the whole time during your first lecture. When you provide an overview of the subject, requirements, assessment, etc., let them ask questions. Create an environment where you welcome questions and that you will answer any issues that they may have. Encourage discussions with you and among students. No matter how well-structured a space is for discussion and group-based learning, unless you encourage students to talk, a new environment simply functions as a traditional lecture hall.

**Disable distractions**

In a class with computers there is nothing wrong with disabling them if they are not needed. You are in control. Tell the students:

- “The terminals have been switched off, so I’d like you all to sit in front of the desks and just listen today. Next week we will do an activity using the computers”.

**Avoidance strategies**

Of course, it is best to avoid unusual teaching spaces if they are completely inappropriate for the type of class you are giving. If you can, review the assigned teaching space early in the semester and ask for a re-assignment if the teaching space is likely to be a problem for you. Consider swapping with a colleague who may well be grateful for a more interactive teaching space.

**Conclusion**

It is important to remember that good teaching is about much more than the spaces teachers use. New environments can be daunting at times but with some familiarity with such spaces and the technology, and what they can do to support teaching and learning, they can provide enormous possibilities for engagement. New environments provide you new tools to use and new possibilities for interaction. **Plan ahead, take control and make them work for you and your students.**
References and Resources

