

The Issue

Good assessments help students demonstrate how capable they are, they build enthusiasm, encourage exploration, extend capabilities and prepare students for their futures.

Teachers' questions and what we learnt

I always tell students what the learning outcomes are and run over the course outline. Isn't that enough?

It seems that students do not gain much from reading course outlines. We use lots of jargon and assume they have requisite knowledge. Students need to explore your course and work out in their own minds what it is you are trying to help them learn.

Am I safe to assume students will realise the connections between my course and previous courses?

Probably not. Many students may never have fully grasped concepts taught in the way you need them to know them, other students will have forgot what they learnt, still others may not realise the relevance of what they know. If students are to learn they need to relate your course to what they already know, think and feel. That is how meaning and understanding is constructed. As teachers we need to help them make these connections. Resist the temptation to give a lecture to 'refresh' their memories. It will not work. Instead, design exercises where students are actively and collaboratively reconstructing what they know.

Do you think students know how my course prepares them for their future?

No, they will need opportunities to explore this.

Do you think students know how my course fits in with the big picture of my discipline/profession?

Students are unlikely to see the 'big picture' in your course design or appreciate how your course contributes to the programme or the discipline. They may see each of your lectures as separate topics and not be able to integrate them. Design exercises to help students develop a mental framework or big picture understandings. It will make it much easier for them to engage in deep, strong learning and to see how the details relate to each other.

How can I get students to plan their learning and seek help before they fail?

Nobody wants to fail a course. Students often do not realise they are failing. Try helping students plan their activities and realise up front what they will need to know and do and how long it will all take. You can get students to evaluate their own ability and any risks at the start of a course. Throughout a course you can ask students to revisit their plans, to reflect and review. In this way you will help them develop metacognitively and to become more independent.

Do you think that some capabilities are common sense and should not be taught in university courses?

Our diverse student body means that very little is 'common' sense. Studying at advanced levels means using particular vocabularies, knowing what is considered to be good thinking in a discipline/profession and understanding how universities work. Help students explore vocabularies, threshold concepts, protocols and requirements that are necessary for success in your course. Listen to students to find out what they do and do not realise and meet them where they are not where they ought to be.

Analysis

Read these questions to see if you are likely to help students explore content.

Questions for teaching staff

- Do you help students engage in big picture thinking?
- Do you relate the learning in your course to what students already know, think and feel?
- Do you check that students have the knowledge and resources to succeed in your course?
- Do you identify and actively teach threshold concepts?
- Do you help students plan their learning?
- Do you explain or co-construct assessment requirements and check that they are understood and perceived as relevant and fair?
- Do you relate learning and tasks to students' futures?

Questions for those supporting teachers

- Does your programme make sense, in that it is clear how courses relate to each other and to students' futures?
- Can your staff see what students have done in the courses that precede and follow theirs and so they can tailor their courses to ensure coherency?
- Are instructions, sessions and assessments transparent, relevant and fair?

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