

The Issue

Universities have assumed that what they teach will be remembered and available for use by students in their future lives and careers. This is far from the case; applying learning from one context to another is more difficult than most people imagine.

Teachers' questions and what we learnt

How do I extend students' learning and prepare them for transfer?

Give students lots of chances to practice, reflect, get and give feedback. Students need lots of variety and to reflect on what they are doing and how they could use their capabilities in other contexts.

How can I find time to practice skills and do lots of exercises in my course?

You can weave opportunities to practice in all your sessions. Try to design tasks that ask students to use several capabilities at once. Remember you are part of a team. Students take many courses over a degree. Each course needs to make a small but significant contribution. Talk through the focus of your course with colleagues and your programme director.

How do I extend capabilities in a tiered lecture theatre / large class / my subject / theatre?

We interviewed teachers who developed complex capabilities in a whole range of situations. Do not let anything stop you. Push the boundaries. Get creative. Seek advice.

I've always assumed that students will use what I teach when they get to the workplace. Is that right?

No. Much of learning is context dependent. Surprisingly, just because someone knows something in one context does not mean they will recognise it as relevant to another. Using the same concepts in different contexts, and actively planning to use learning in future courses or in the workplace helps.

If you know about something surely you can apply that knowledge?

The way we think about something when we write an essay is different to the way we think when we have to do something. Students who have written very good essays may not have learnt to do anything at all (except write very good essays). It is important that we teach students to do the tasks we think are important and not just learn about them as topics. Equally, it is important we support students in developing attitudes and values and do not just tell them about attitudes and values.

You recommend collaboration and peer feedback but isn't it a teacher's job to set criteria, judge performance and give feedback?

Yes, it is in part, but students need to be taught how to define, demonstrate and evaluate their own performance and the performance of others. This is how they come to lead independent, thoughtful, responsible lives and careers. In the workplace truth is often socially defined and negotiated. In academia too there are often no right and wrong answers. Having students engage in dialogue to co-construct shared understandings is an important capability.

Analysis

Read these questions to see if you are likely to extend students' capabilities.

Questions for teaching staff

- Do you give students whole problems to solve rather than components?
- Do students work together to negotiate and construct meanings?
- Do students provide and receive lots of feedback on the capabilities you aim to develop?
- Do you give students a wide range of challenges to tackle?
- Do you get students to reflect, critique and improve?
- Do you recognise and reward progress?

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