



# Teaching Toolkit

---

## Structuring a Teaching Session

---

Author: Paul Surgenor

Email: [paul.surgenor@ucd.ie](mailto:paul.surgenor@ucd.ie)

Date: January 2010

## Structuring a Teaching Session

The structure of the class should promote learning and the growing consensus is that the most effective way of achieving this is to actively engage students in their learning (Race, 1993). Since students' attention in class tends to drop after 15 – 20 minutes (Newble & Cannon, 1995) efforts should be made to intersperse the class with rest periods, opportunities for reflection, and activities that maintain interest (Jenkins & Pepper, 1988). The use of such learning activities has been advocated by in numerous studies.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle exemplifies the concept of 'learning by doing', and idea echoed by Gibbs' (1992) emphasis on gaining deeper understanding through participation, and Spronken-Smith's (2005) 'hand's on' approach to learning. This represents a move from the passive, transmission approach to teaching, and the class structure should be reflecting this pedagogical shift.

Revell and Wainwright (2009) summarise the key to preparing an 'unmissable' lecture in three key points:

- 1) a high degree of student participation and interaction
- 2) a clear structure which enabled students to identify key points and make integrative links with other areas of the course
- 3) the passion and enthusiasm of the lecturer, and the degree to which she/he can bring a subject to life

### ***Student Participation and Interaction***

Discussions with staff and students reported that a good lecture should include regular breaks for discussion and group activities that required the students to engage with the material and think for themselves (i.e., buzz groups, brainstorming, debates, role playing, plenary sessions, problem-solving, presentation work etc.). This helped to encourage active learning and combat the decline in attention levels as the lecture proceeds. The use of questions at the beginning of the class encouraged discussion and debated from the outset and provided some information on prior levels of student knowledge.

### ***The Role of Structure***

A clear structure was regarded as a guiding pathway through what sometimes felt like a morass of information, and enabled students to prioritise information and to identify links and connections between concepts and ideas. Deviation from the outlined structure often resulted in problems among students, particularly in discerning how these

digressions related to the initial topic, and whether these points were important or an interesting aside.

A highly structured approach was considered one that was well prepared in advance, with the lecturer covering points systematically on slides with only a limited degree of digression. The advantages of this approach were felt to be the logical sequencing of points which aided comprehension and the explicit signposting of key issues so that students could separate the 'wood from the trees'. Clearly linking the individual learning outcomes of lectures with the broader goals of the module and the course itself was felt to encourage students to construct meaning using a deep rather than surface approach to learning. However, some lecturers also emphasized that there was a balance to be had, as too much structure could border on spoon-feeding, and that a more free-flowing approach encouraged creativity and spontaneity, which helped students to think for themselves.

Lectures were seen as having the dual purpose of transmitting content and, more importantly, to stimulate students' own learning and reading on a subject. According to Race (2001) each lecture should have three clear sections:

## A Beginning

### **The Introduction:**

Tell them what you are going to tell them

## A Middle

### **The Body:**

Tell them it

## An End

### **The Conclusion:**

Remind them what you have told them

Cannon and Newble (2002) suggested that the content of lectures can be sequenced in many ways depending on the material, but they gave some different ideas for sequencing:

- Proceed from reality to abstract ideas, theories, principles. E.g. video clip first.
- Proceed from generalisations to particular examples and applications.
- Proceed from simple ideas to complex ones
- Proceed from what students can be expected to know to what students don't know
- Proceed from common misconceptions to clarifications and explanations
- Proceed from a whole view to a more detailed view.

The beginning and the end of the lecture are most likely to be remembered.

	Content	Tips
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– State aims &amp; objectives of lecture</li><li>– Outline key areas to be covered</li><li>– How content links with previous lecture &amp; course</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Be clear</li><li>– Have an interesting opening (controversial statement or quote; use photo or video clip)</li><li>– Provide outline or structure</li></ul>
Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Presentation of key points</li><li>– Summarise the link &amp; each key point</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Keep information simple</li><li>– Avoid too much content</li><li>– Include activities every 15-20 minutes</li><li>– Use relevant examples, anecdotes, or illustrations</li></ul>
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Summarise the literature</li><li>– Link it back to the introduction</li><li>– Conclude with where the topic/module is leading next</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Finish on time</li><li>– Consider how to evaluate students' learning</li></ul>

## **The Passion and Enthusiasm of the Lecturer**

The third aspect considered crucial to engaging students was the personality and charisma of the lecturer, and the degree to which she/he could bring a subject to life. In addition to qualities such as charisma, stimulation, humour, motivation, and excitement (Cooke, 2004), students considered expertise in delivery and pacing, along with the use of real-life stories and anecdotes, as important ways of animating a lecture. The most important factor highlighted by students, however, was the passion and enthusiasm of the lecturer, and their ability to inspire students. Personal attributes were also important to help establish a sense of rapport with students. Engagement was increased by making the lecturer more approachable and this in turn emboldens students to ask questions on issues they don't fully understand.

Revell and Wainwright (2009) conclude by stating that lectures should be designed to provide a structure and framework so that students are better able to see the 'big picture'. Lecturers should synthesize information, highlight intended learning outcomes, and repeat key points so that integrative links are more easily made. Students often perceive the information given by lecturers as more valuable than information they can find in the library, as lecturers have already gone through a process of selection and synthesized the important information. Lectures should be used to bring a subject to life for students by lecturers conveying their enthusiasm and passion for the topic. Enthusiasm and commitment also comprise one of the few factors that cannot be conveyed by independent learning. Lectures should be used as a means for academics to communicate the findings of their research, and as an excellent medium for providing the most current information on a topic (information that may not yet be in the public domain). Most importantly, lectures—even large-group ones—should generally be interactive. While it might be true that higher cognitive outcomes are more likely to be acquired in small-group sessions, research shows that they may at least be partially acquired in conventional lectures with a high degree of participation (Exley & Dennick, 2004).