

FIRST YEAR CORE COURSE LEADERS' COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE TOOLKIT

FIRST YEAR COURSE LEADERS TOOLKIT ITEM

*Getting started and
setting expectations*

THE USQ
CoPs PROJECT

Faculty of Arts CoP
and
Faculty of Business CoP

<http://www.usq.edu.au/cops>

USQ UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

Topic: Getting started – the first few weeks

Thinking about your first classes

What is the intended outcome?

To design learning activities and formative assessment which provide explicit guidance for students making the transition to higher education and create a safe and welcoming environment that facilitates students' engagement with course material.

What is the established practice?

Many convenors have already established such practices within their own teaching. Others are using one of the two overarching approaches to getting started: either explicit teaching around expectations of student performance or student engagement activities. There may be a final group that have been put off using either strategy because of the perceived complexity and the use of valuable time required.

What are the advantages for teachers and students in considering strategies for their first weeks of teaching?

The learning and engagement strategies explored here support student learning by making expectations around student performance explicit. They also support student learning through the creation of a learning environment that encourages student participation and engagement with course material. Activities in the first weeks do require valuable time but they contribute positively to student success and retention.

Background

Within the university context there is a growing awareness that the first few weeks of teaching are of prime importance for students. In first year, the beginning of semester is particularly important because it provides opportunities for teaching staff to design activities that help students manage their transition to the higher education context.

Challenge

The challenge for first year convenors is to provide a safe, engaging and socially rich environment for students' first weeks. At the same time, they must be mindful of the necessity of kick-starting the development of key academic literacies, which students will need to be successful in their studies, and ultimately, in their professional work. Many of the learning and teaching strategies here reflect one of these two overarching challenges.

What can we do in our first classes?

Some CoP members use their first classes to understand and manage student expectations, as well as [clearly articulating their own expectations](#), as course convenors. This can include the provision of explicit information about university, disciplinary and course norms and practices, or assessment and teaching activities that requires students to use course websites. [These activities](#) serve a dual purpose as they also develop students' *meta-awareness* of their own learning.

In the first weeks of any course, it is important to demonstrate the belief that students are capable of achieving good results. Strategies such as the use of [learning contracts](#) and formative assessment items that focus on planning and preparation builds students' confidence in their abilities.

Other CoP members focus on relationship-building, student engagement and motivation. Some use [group](#) and '[getting-to-know-you](#)' activities that build relationships between students themselves, as well as devising different strategies to learn students' names. Other members design [creative learning activities](#) that allow students to have fun whilst learning. These strategies serve to create a welcoming class environment where students can enjoy their learning.

Finally, the first weeks of any first year course present an opportunity for convenors to engender passion in students for what they are learning. Aside from the obvious value of convenors themselves modelling passionate engagement with the material being taught, CoP members use specific strategies to engage students. These include using examples that are relevant and up-to-date, designing learning activities that offer opportunity for student engagement, and presenting material in a way that foregrounds debates and controversies around chosen topics.

Key points for getting started

- Focus on creating a welcoming environment through the development of relationships between students, and between yourself and students
- Include activities that allow students to engage, or have fun, with the material, and each other
- Be clear about your expectations of students, and what they can expect from you and your team
- Be explicit about disciplinary and course norms and practices, particularly in relation to assessment and learning activities
- Demonstrate your own engagement with course material, as well as designing relevant, up-to-date, activities that offer students the opportunity to do so
- Believe in students' abilities and provide them with learning activities that build both confidence and skills
- Present course material in a way that foregrounds debates and controversies around the discipline topic.

Final Word

The chosen case studies represent a range of activities, assessment strategies and other initiatives that are designed to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in their first semester(s). They are also focused on creating an environment that is conducive to student engagement and learning, in both face-to-face and online contexts. Many of the activities here suit the dispositions and strengths of the CoP members who designed them; this may well indicate that personal preference and 'fit' is an important consideration for convenors thinking about strategies for their first weeks of teaching.