

LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

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From the Editor:

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'Learning Matters at Lingnan' are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the University. If you feel you have something which might be appropriate for inclusion in an issue of this publication, then please forward it to the TLC. I would be delighted if staff (and not only academic staff) from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre were to be prominent or even occasional contributors.



A Few Tips for the First Semester Classes

The first few classes in a new semester can be pretty tough terrain, especially when your students are new to university education. 'Crowd Control' may seem a somewhat inappropriate or unpalatable term to be using in the context of university teaching. It is, however, an issue requiring consideration in a context of large classes and a learning situation foreign to most if not all new students.

Below are a few ideas that have worked for some instructors to ensure large groups of students can learn together effectively:

- We can't expect a student to pay attention to someone speaking for longer than 20 minutes without a break from that activity. So, variety is the key to effective teaching.
- Recognise the shared responsibility, yours and your students', for the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Stress at the outset that it is not just your responsibility.
- Set clear ground rules to guide how the group should operate to create a constructive learning environment. The following are examples of possible ground rules:
 - Classes start and finish on time.
 - Everybody has the right to be heard.
 - It is OK not to understand / not to know.
 - Everybody should come to the class prepared.
 - Learning is the main task of the group.
 - Everybody should participate / contribute
 - Anyone can suggest adding to or changing the ground rules at any time.

Such ground rules contribute to an atmosphere that is open, fair and respectful and provide clear boundaries within which teaching and learning take place.

- Be sure to follow your own rules and expect the students to do likewise. Be prepared to express controlled irritations when rules are not being followed. Do this early and you will not need to do it often. Attentive students will appreciate you for this.
- As students may be unused to setting ground rules, especially in the first year, it may be helpful first of all to explain the purpose of having ground rules, and to then propose a set of rules for the group to discuss, add to or delete. It may then be useful after a couple of weeks to review the ground rules. For ground rules to be effective it is very important to remind people when they break them. It is also important that you don't see yourself as not bound by the rules — invite students to point out to you if you break any of the rules established.
- Get to know your students as quickly as possible. Be able to address them by name. You will be amazed at how much difference this simple gesture makes to your students — at how much more engaged they, in turn, will become.
- Students need to feel that we believe in them — that we believe that they can do what we're asking of them — in order to push themselves to perform at the edge of their capacity. If all they hear is disapproval, which makes them feel inadequate and deficient, why bother? The more hopeful we can make our students about their prospects for growth, the more growth we're likely to see.
- Use the physical space effectively. This may mean walking up the aisles on occasions during the instruction. Physical proximity usually serves to exercise control and get attention from students sitting near the back row.
- Be strategic in dealing with difficult situations arising with students. Avoid direct and public confrontation. Speak to the 'problem' student privately after the class. Ask the student what the problem is and ask for a commitment to appropriate behaviour.
- If the problem still persists, be prepared to seek help from others and refer students appropriately.

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