Coffee and Cookies:
Conversations on Good Teaching

Part 3 - UNDERSTANDING AND ASSISTING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES WITH COURSEWORK

This series of ‘Conversations’ was inspired by interviews with lecturers from 44 courses who accepted an invitation to discuss their teaching experiences as part of the CES Analysis Project. They were asked about changes they had made to their course, and their motivations for doing so, and also about the ways in which they addressed the GTS items most highly correlated with good teaching. The gift of their valuable time, and their honesty, in these conversations on good teaching is most gratefully acknowledged, as is the permission to share some of their wonderful ideas on how to create a valuable learning experience for their students.

More details about the CES Analysis Project and the ‘Coffee & Cookies’ Summary of Findings can be found online at http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/cesanalysis.

A 2007 project conducted by Helen Monk and Robert Webster investigated the experiences of various students beginning their studies at RMIT in that year. ‘Discussions with Commencing Students’ is available at http://www.rmit.edu.au/planning-group/student-feedback-reports and several of the findings are used here to reflect the views of some RMIT students on those issues discussed with lecturers.
A Thought to Begin With . . .

We hope that, if you are inspired by any of the ideas shared here, you will take them and give them the flavour of your own personality, for use in your own way, in your own classes. Ken Bain uses a wonderful analogy to illustrate the need for each teacher to "digest, transform, and individualise what (they) see" when he notes that painting with the same brush strokes as Rembrandt would not, of itself, "replicate his genius".

“To take the Rembrandt analogy a step further, the great Dutch artist could not be Picasso any more than the Spanish painter could replicate his predecessor; each had to find his own genius. So too must teachers adjust every idea to who they are and what they teach.”

What the Best College Teachers Do, Ken Bain (2004)

Understanding and Assisting Students Experiencing Difficulties

Of the 41 subject areas for which a distinct Teaching Factor could be extracted, Item 19 ‘The staff make a real effort to understand difficulties I might be having with my work’ correlated most highly with the teaching factor in only one subject area in Semester 1 2007\(^1\). However, it ranked second in 8 areas and third in 27 areas, generally with a very strong positive correlation to the teaching factor. Even though the question asked was specifically regarding coursework, many lecturers noted the importance of empathy and understanding when their students were experiencing problems or hardship in their personal lives as well. During informal discussion, several lecturers shared stories about students who had experienced various difficulties, and the ways in which they had provided support to help these students overcome asperity and achieve. This help was often specially tailored for the individual circumstances and required extra time and effort, but the pride felt in their student’s success, as well as the student’s gratitude, was both rewarding and motivating for the lecturers. If “understanding human needs is half the job of meeting them”\(^2\), the ways in which lecturers address Item 19 of the CES may demonstrate a very important aspect of good teaching.

\(^1\) High correlation of an item to a factor indicates there was considerable variation in the responses to that item. In this case, student responses were spread across the Likert scale of 1 - 5 rather than tending to cluster around any particular options; indicating a lack of agreement regarding the efforts made by staff to understand any difficulties the students were facing.

\(^2\) Adlai Stevenson
What are lecturers doing to assist students experiencing difficulties with coursework?

There are various ways in which lecturers aim to assist their students. As seen in Figure 1, most of the answers to this question describe different aspects of demonstrating both the lecturer’s concern for student learning, and their willingness to guide students in that learning.

Inviting and encouraging students to ask questions or seek extra help was a common method used by lecturers to ensure they were able to effectively address student difficulties. This included encouraging questions outside of class or via email, and always emphasising to students to come and see them if they were having any problems. It was often mentioned that this encouragement must be genuine and regular for students to really internalise it and feel comfortable; it is not enough to say it once.

“I think it is important to always convey to students that you are approachable and open to questions, both during class and informally. I try to develop an atmosphere in my class where students feel comfortable asking questions and sharing answers because I believe that being able to think and question is so important for their learning.”

Sharing questions within class enabled lecturers to ascertain those areas with which students were struggling (Jackson, 1997) and provide further explanation or practice, particularly where concepts presented a problem for more than one student. Many of the lecturers felt that the sharing of questions in class could help students feel they were not alone in needing clarification, a point also observed in research (Bain, 2004; Klopfenstein, 2003). Three lecturers further emphasised to students that there are no “dumb” questions – only the ones left unasked! Research highlights the importance of asking questions in order to build knowledge, stimulate thinking and problem solving, and encourage cooperative learning (Bain, 2004; Biggs, 1999). RMIT students themselves placed a high priority on
interaction in classes, and felt it was important that there be opportunities for questions and answers and discussion, both in lectures and tutorials (Monk & Webster, 2008). So important, in fact, that ‘Students consistently rated teachers who provided opportunities to discuss lecture content or ask questions highly and those who did not poorly (Monk & Webster, 2008, p.9)’. For one highly rated lecturer:

“I consistently remind my students that I am receptive to their concerns, and invite them to ask questions – after all, I cannot help them if I don’t know what problems they are having. I do encourage them to raise questions in class, as far as possible, as I think it can be more reassuring when we all discuss things together: I think it helps the confidence of others. Sometimes students need more than this, though, and I encourage them to make a time to see me one on one if they require more individual assistance.”

With class time obviously limited, however, many of these lecturers also reassured students that they were available before, after or between classes for questions and/or that they welcomed questions via email if students were having problems with their work. One lecturer encouraged students to keep a log book of specific questions to ask. The aim of this was twofold. Firstly, to discourage ‘I don’t get it’ type comments and focus attention on exactly what was not understood, particularly where lack of understanding of an area was common and could be addressed through class discussion. Secondly, the lecturer found that, in breaking things down to pinpoint precisely what they don’t understand, students often discover the answer for themselves. If they still need assistance, it is easier for the lecturer to address a specific problem area than a vague lack of understanding.

Another aspect of inviting questions, especially via email or online, is the time taken to reply. Responding to student questions about their work or course material is a form of giving feedback, and it has been widely acknowledged that feedback must be prompt in order to be useful (Gross Davis, 1993; Jackson, 1997; McMahon, 2006). In the ideal experience, according to RMIT focus group students, teaching staff would be ‘. . . quick to respond to queries (Monk & Webster, 2008, p.24).’ Of the lecturers who were asked if they set a turnaround time for answering student emails, they all stated that they replied as soon as possible, with nearly half specifically aiming for within 24 hours, and a further third between 24 and 48 hours.

Many lecturers stressed the importance of being available and accessible to students. These qualities are recognised as essential for student learning by both researchers (Axelrod, 2007; Kane et al, 2004) and students (Arthus, 2008; Rieutort-Louis, 2008). An important aspect of this for RMIT focus group students was that staff provide information ‘. . . at the outset about how and when to contact them for further guidance (Monk & Webster, 2008, p.25).’ As with the section above, most of these lecturers emphasised their willingness to see students before or after class, and some also had set consultation or open door times each week for students to visit them as needed. Set open door times provide the assurance that, no matter how busy a lecturer is, there are hours in the week students will always be able to catch them in their office. “Advertising” availability is important so that students know they will not have to struggle alone (Arthus, 2008). One lecturer was pleased with CES feedback which demonstrated the benefits to her students of knowing that she was there to help when needed, both within and outside of the class:

“Problems with work are easily solved because of (the lecturer's) availability.”

One-on-one consultation was another way several lecturers ensured they were available to assist students. Some of these lecturers met with students by appointment as needed, and some met with students regularly as a way of providing support, feedback and assistance. Which approach was used often depended on the nature of the subject, the personality of the lecturer, the number of students in the class and the differing needs of those students. However often it is employed, one-on-one consultation addresses the desire of students to be known as individuals and have their concerns or problems addressed individually (Anonymous, 2008; Luce, 1990).

“One of the most important aspects of teaching, for me, is an ethos of pastoral care. I also think it is very important to be approachable. I invite my students to see me, or email me, if they have any concerns, and I make time for regular individual discussion with students. As I teach a large class, I encourage all my tutors to do the same. This
benefits students and helps overcome the daunting feeling many have when they commence studies in large lecture groups. The time made available to help students early makes it much easier to pick up potential difficulties before these might disadvantage the student.”

Showing empathy and care for their students, and being approachable was recognised as an important aspect of helping students overcome difficulties. These lecturers felt that students are more likely to seek help from someone they feel is genuinely interested in their welfare. Research has supported this time and again, emphasising that students remember and appreciate teachers who are approachable, compassionate and understanding, and who treat their students with fairness and concern (Axelrod, 2007; Bain, 2004; Kane et al, 2004). Students have themselves said that they respond to teachers who are friendly and approachable (Monk & Webster, 2008), treat students with respect (Anonymous, 2008) and ‘understand the learning perspective of students (Rieutort-Louis, 2008).’ Lecturers spoke about the importance of a good teacher-student relationship, of knowing their students, or of there being an atmosphere of trust. Much research also emphasises the importance of the interpersonal connection between teacher and student, and the effect on students of knowing that their lecturer sees them, and cares about them, as an individual (Hattie, 2003; Lowman, 1996; Monahan, 2005; Ramsden, 1992). Sometimes, caring enough to be open and available may be all that is needed. ‘If we want to support each other’s inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard (Palmer, 2007, p.156).’ One lecturer shared this story:

“I had a student who was experiencing some difficulty with my class; more than I had realised. While I always encourage my students to come and see me if they have any problems, it took this poor girl two hours to summon up enough courage to do so. I just listened while she poured out all her worries. Once she had explained it all, I was able to encourage her that we could work through it, step by step, and that she would be ok. I think the most powerful thing for her was having the opportunity to express her anxieties, and that I acknowledged their validity.”

A few lecturers noted that they attempted to identify problems and address them in class and/or approached students individually to offer help. They achieved this in several ways: during class discussion, noting questions raised in informal conversation, and through close scrutiny of assessed work. Using these methods helped them to ascertain areas which might be presenting difficulties for students, and enabled them to adjust classes, groups or assessment accordingly, in order to provide further assistance or explanation (Bain, 2004; Ramsden, 1992). Sometimes lecturers would approach students individually to apprise the student of their concerns and offer the opportunity to ask further questions or seek further help (Jackson, 1997; Kane et al, 2004). One lecturer emphasised that if a class was missed, the student must see the lecturer or a tutor to catch up so they don’t fall behind or miss anything important. Again, these lecturers believed that demonstrating their care and concern for their students’ learning is important if students are to feel comfortable discussing any difficulties they might be having (Axelrod, 2007; Kane et al, 2004; Palmer, 2007).

“In my courses, teaching staff observe the development of each student, so that additional support can be provided where necessary. We’re trying to provide more opportunities for them to talk with their teachers and I think this makes them feel very special. I also approach students and invite them to come and see me if I am concerned that they need extra help. I think sitting down with students makes it more personal; you can tell them your concerns and have a good talk with them. I feel that my students appreciate this, and it tends to lead them to want to put in more effort to overcome the problem.”

Some lecturers provided sessions or activities specifically designed to give help and feedback to students, or to assist them in the development of necessary skills; for example, essay writing or using the library. These sessions were sometimes in addition to normal scheduled classes, and six lecturers also noted that they would refer students requiring more specialised help to resources such as the SLC. Along with researchers, these lecturers perceived that there are many students who need extra help and guidance in order to learn “how to learn” (Bain, 2004; Luce, 1990; Palmer, 2007). The nature of activities differed according to discipline, student year level or background, learning objectives, or the skills required for effective learning in the course.
“I find that one of the areas in which my students tend to need extra assistance is simply getting started – overcoming their skills training in procrastination! One of the ways I achieve this is by helping them develop mind maps to plan out their essays more effectively and provide them with a starting point. In doing this, I place an emphasis on them utilising their own terms of reference, as I feel this aids their understanding. Discussion of the mind maps is an important part of the process, so that students can gain feedback before beginning their essay. I also wrote an essay on how to prepare a mind map and write an essay, which I give to my students as a guide for their own work.”

A few lecturers also held optional extra sessions when assessment was due in order to provide assistance to those who were struggling with assignments. These sessions were largely to provide formative feedback or the opportunity for students to “workshop” assignments one on one with the lecturer. Students generally indicate a deep appreciation for lecturers who they feel go to extra lengths to provide them with guidance (Monk & Webster, 2008; Rieutort-Louis, 2008).

Draft submissions, or resubmissions, with feedback were encouraged by some lecturers in order to provide extra help for those students who need it. While those who struggle the most receive the greatest benefit from formative assessment (Falchikov, 2005), it also recognises the importance for all students of having the opportunity to try, fail, receive feedback, and try again in order to learn (Bain, 2004; Palmer, 2007). Again, lecturers offered feedback on submissions in various ways; via email, through one on one consultation, or in special sessions. Common to all of them, however, was that they encouraged students that they could all achieve highly, and gave them detailed advice as to how they could improve their work, either in written or verbal form. Formative assessment also gives lecturers a chance to provide encouragement to students via positive feedback and acknowledgement of their efforts. The impact of positive feedback on student learning and motivation is widely acknowledged (Bain, 2004; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Jackson, 1997; Weller, 2005).

“I feel it is very important to give my students all the support they need to do as well as they can, and I emphasise that they all have the ability to do well. Students provide a draft of their assignment, for which they are given detailed feedback, and the opportunity to make improvements. Lecturer and tutor are both available to talk through any issues students have and assist them in overcoming problems. I get to know them and where they’re coming from, and this helps me to understand when I need to provide special care and be very encouraging. This process can be time consuming, but it is very effective and much appreciated.”

Integrating formative assessment into a course offers the opportunity for all students to learn as much as possible, and achieve the best that they can, by providing feedback and guidance at the level each student needs, and focussing on mastery of the subject (Axelrod, 2007; Bain, 2004; Gross Davis, 1993). RMIT students appreciated formative assessment as a way to spread their workload across semester, gain an idea of what is required, and ask for further help where necessary (Monk & Webster, 2008).

Having an awareness of the different needs of students and/or allowing flexibility in presentation or assessment to allow for differences. Many of these lecturers were very aware of the backgrounds of some of their students, and made the effort to know and understand as much as they could about their class, in order to assist them in their learning (Bain, 2004). While they appreciated the value different experiences, personalities and cultures could contribute to a class, they were also sensitive to the way in which these same differences could affect their students’ learning experience (Bain, 2004; Luce, 1990; Palmer, 2007). Differences could arise from cultural background, including ESL, age or prior education, or between full time and part time students (the latter often juggling work and/or children); as well as encompassing differing learning styles and preferences, and students with physical or learning disabilities. One lecturer noted that:

“I think sensitivity is essential when students are experiencing difficulties, and working with each student in a way which is appropriate for them. Especially with international students, I think it is important to be aware of the variability of the culture of learning. When my students are having problems we sit down and work through the issues together, seeking a different explanation or offering comparisons where they don’t understand. An important aspect of this is offering the chance for all students to have one on one dialogue, which helps me to develop an awareness of their needs”
Research supports the idea that teachers need, not only to be aware of the individuality of their students, but also to be adaptable enough to accommodate the diversity of learning needs and abilities (Bain, 2004; Kane et al, 2004). One way lecturers achieved this was by offering students alternatives for activities and assessments. This included allowing students to choose the way in which they presented their work, and allowing extensions where students experienced difficulty in completion. For example, one lecturer noted that they allowed students to present work as an essay if they found a presentation so nerve wracking they couldn’t do their work justice, while others encouraged oral presentation for students who found it difficult to write cohesively. Where these options were given, lecturers designed the various assessments so that students could effectively demonstrate their grasp of the material, and their fulfillment of learning objectives, no matter how they presented. This flexibility focuses on the importance of individual learning, and demonstrates to students that their lecturer understands their needs and anxieties, and wants them to do as well as they can (Luce, 1990; Lowman, 1996; Rieutort-Louis, 2008). RMIT focus group students indicated their desire for a mix of assessments in order to allow for different learning styles, demonstrate knowledge, and link assessment to course outcomes (Monk & Webster, 2008).

“I am very aware that the students in my class differ widely in age and prior experience, and can have very different reasons for enrolling in my course. While I centre everything around learning goals, I am aware of the fact that these may differ for some of my students. I find it helps students to be able to complete alternative assessments which are more relevant to their own background, career, and prior knowledge. Many of them are already in employment, so I am also quite happy to grant extensions if they feel they need more time to complete assignments to the best of their ability.”

Some lecturers encouraged peer help through group work, monitored DLS discussion, or the class environment. If “a good teacher knows . . . that with room for discussion, there is room for improvement” (Jackson, 1997), the provision of opportunities for interaction and peer feedback can provide a valuable medium for students experiencing difficulties. Using the online discussion board can provide an opportunity for students to continue discussing and supporting each other outside of class hours, an interaction valued by RMIT focus students (Monk & Webster, 2008). Engaging in dialogue with both teachers and other students stimulates thinking, and encourages students to build their own understanding (Bain, 2004; Biggs, 1999). One lecturer advocated peer support early on:

“[I] suggest to my students that they form small study groups in order to discuss and debate material and work through questions together. I encourage them to engage with other students whose interests are similar, so that they can support and learn from each other as they work through assessments and evaluate their experiences in the course. With good resources and support from lecturers I find that they benefit from this experience by learning from others, and also learning how to work with others.”

Working together, both within and outside of class, can help students develop their ability to co-operate, critically analyse and problem solve, while increasing their independence and responsibility in learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Falchikov, 2005). In explaining to others, students gain an opportunity to further consolidate their own understanding (Biggs & Tang, 2007), and it has been noted that feedback from peers can, at times, have more value to students than that of a teacher by being easier to understand (Davies, 2003). Encouraging students to work together and assist each other, particularly those who are struggling, can therefore provide benefits for all. RMIT focus group students expressed a strong desire to be a part of this type of collegial learning environment, where students help other students and are able to build strong support networks (Monk & Webster, 2008).

Some other resources provided by lecturers in order to assist students experiencing difficulties: Lecturers utilised tutors to provide extra support to students, provided helpful tips and resources on handouts or the DLS, or gave students marking guides with a clear indication of requirements. One lecturer provided online quizzes with answers, and guidance to further information, and another kept records of progress which were emailed to students along with advice in week 8 of semester. One lecturer provided quasi interactive videos for each topic covered in the course which students could watch in order, or use individually as a tool for revision, or where they were experiencing problems grasping a topic. These are all examples of the kind of accessible information and useful resources
complementary to teaching which are so appreciated by students (Monk & Webster, 2008; Rieutort-Louis, 2008), and were developed by these lecturers in response to a perceived need, and in a form designed to support learning in their particular discipline.

A few lecturers helped their students develop learning plans, or emphasised the importance of time management in completing the necessary readings, activities and assessment for the course. Setting out a plan for achievement of tasks will assist students on their journey towards achieving the goals of the course, as well as completing those tasks in a timely manner (Bain, 2004; Weller, 2005). RMIT focus group students indicated that they felt students should be provided with a course outline which includes the content to be covered in the course as well as the assessment in order for them to better plan their learning (Monk & Webster, 2008). According to the literature, such plans may assist with perceptions of workload, thereby leading to more effective learning (McMahon, 2006; Ramsden, 1992).

The Personal Nature of Teaching

In these conversations, lecturers shared their thoughts on some of the more effective approaches they have taken to try to assist students experiencing difficulties with coursework. Some of these, such as encouraging questions or ensuring availability were common while others, such as the development of videos or encouraging study groups to support learning were utilised by individual lecturers as a way to provide the most effective help to students for their particular subject. Notably, while care and empathy for students was a specific answer for a number of lecturers, demonstrating concern for their students' progress and welfare, and caring enough to be as available and approachable as possible, were themes running through almost every answer in this section. The ways in which lecturers achieved this were as varied as their personalities, but the desire to do so was always evident.

It was frequently noted that it is important for teachers to be true to themselves and their own philosophy of teaching in their classes. Lecturers made comments like “I know that works for some people, but it’s just not me”, “I don’t feel comfortable doing that in my classes”, or “It just fits with what I believe about good teaching to do it this way”. The fact that these people are open to other ideas is evidenced by the number who talked in the interviews about their desire to see more sharing of ideas, or about the approaches they used which were inspired by someone else. However, it is important to these lecturers that they feel free to teach in the way that is most comfortable for them, and most beneficial for their students. This theme is echoed in much of the literature, which acknowledges the difficulty of defining exactly what good teaching is when it can be so many different things, in spite of commonalities, and is so very personal at its best (Bain, 2004; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Kane et al, 2004; Lowman, 1996; Palmer, 2007; Ramsden, 1992). These lecturers were often acutely aware of the individual needs of their students, and were prepared to adjust the way in which they assisted and assessed learning in order to encourage deeper learning for each individual, regardless of the personal challenges they faced.

The stories shared here by lecturers about the ways in which they seek to understand and thereby best assist students experiencing difficulties surely demonstrate that “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” (Palmer, 2007, p.10)

Acknowledgements

Thanks must go firstly to Professor Jim Barber, for his support of this project. I would also like to thank the following people who assisted with mail outs, data, advice and direction, proofreading and suggestions, encouragement and coffee: Ms. Faye Thomas, Dr. Anthony Bedford, Ms. Stephanie Romagnano, Ms. Sally Daniel, Ms. Margaret Blackburn, Dr. Josephine Lang, Mr. John Milton, Ms. Helen Monk, Mr. Andrew Buntine, Mr. James Baglin
Most importantly, my gratitude goes to the lecturers who gave their time and shared their insights. Their names, apart from those who wished to remain anonymous, are listed here.

Mr. Luis Alban
Mrs. Lee Anton-Hem
Ms. Suzie Attiwill
Mr. Peter Burton
Mr. Stewart Carter
Mr. Paul Cerotti
Dr. Anne-Marie Christensen
Ms. Amanda Crane
Ms. Arda Culpan
Ms. Robyn Dale
Dr. Amalia Di Iorio
Associate Professor Phillip Ebrall
Ms. Susan Elliott
Ms. Irene Ellis
Ms. Rys Farthing
Mr. Mark Galer
Ms. Glenys Grob
Associate Professor James Harland
Mr. Robert Inglis
Dr. Nira Jayasuriya
Mr. Tom Josev
Dr. George Lenon
Dr. Lynne Li
Ms. Maree Macmillan
Associate Professor Theo Macrides
Dr. Bee May
Associate Professor Jock McCulloch
Professor Catherine McDonald
Dr. Keith McVilly
Ms. Clare Miller
Ms. Kerry Montero
Dr. Berenice Nyland
Dr. Tim O’Shannassy
Dr. Tim O’Shannassy
Mr. Philip Petersen
Ms. Kathryn Robson
Ms. Simone Rodda
Mr. Grant Roff
Dr. Andrew Scott
Professor Dianne Siemon
Mr. Brian Thorpe
Associate Professor Kevin White
Ms. Sally Wright

"In a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honour and the highest responsibility anyone could have."

Lee Iacocca

References


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