

Teaching at the Right Level

INTRODUCTION

One of the easiest mistakes to make when teaching is to expect students to perform at a professional, experienced level. For example, at an end of year show one visitor was overheard saying “the work here is not as good as the stuff my clients expect me to produce”, while another said “these students wouldn’t survive in industry: their work is not professional enough.”

The people making the comments were ignoring the fact that education is not the same as training, and that it is not the role of FE or HE to get students to a “professional” standard of the sort that should really only come with professional *experience*.

A first year undergraduate should not be expected to produce work at post-graduate level, yet many of our judgements about what to teach and the expectations we place on students are at that level. It is important to step back from our own expertise and see learning as a path that may not end within the constraints of a three year degree. Taking this step back is quite difficult. One media technology lecturer started teaching QuarkXpress believing it was his job in ten weeks to make sure students knew every keyboard shortcut, all the different menu commands, and how to specify spot and process colours within a document, then save a file along with its fonts and images in a “pre-flight” check. It was only when he realised it had taken him *five years* of constantly working with QuarkXpress to acquire the same knowledge and skills that he began to realise why he was so disappointed with his students’ progress. Now he is much more realistic and sets learning outcomes that are appropriate for students encountering the package for the first time.

QUESTION

Teaching at the Right Level

- ❖ **THINK FOR A FEW MINUTES ABOUT THE AREA YOU TEACH. HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO REACH YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF EXPERTISE?**

- ❖ **DO YOU SEE IT AS YOUR ROLE TO GET STUDENTS TO YOUR LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING AND SKILL?**

- ❖ **HOW DO YOU THINK THIS INFLUENCES YOUR TEACHING AND YOUR EXPECTATIONS OF YOUR STUDENTS?**

DECIDING ON THE RIGHT LEVEL

Fortunately for us, there is a set of guidelines available for all degree courses that lays out exactly what students should be able to achieve by the end of their first, second and third years.

The full set of guidelines is available from the Quality Assurance Agency web site (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/nqf.htm>). The guidelines for “Certificate” level (first year undergraduate) are presented here. Take a few minutes to read through them quickly.

Teaching at the Right Level

Certificate¹ level (usually end of year 1)

The holder of a certificate of higher education will have a sound knowledge of the basic concepts of a subject, and will have learned how to take different approaches to solving problems. He or she will be able to communicate accurately and will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

Students will have demonstrated:

- i. knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study;
- ii. an ability to present, evaluate, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- a. evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work;
- b. communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments;
- c. undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment;
and will have:
- d. qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

¹ For those who are interested, here's how it works: Students who successfully complete 120 credits at level 1 or above are entitled to a CertHE, hence the name "Certificate Level".

240 credits, 120 of which are at level 2 or above, lead to a DipHE, so the next level is known as "Diploma Level".

Teaching at the Right Level

QUESTION

- ❖ THINK OF A FIRST YEAR COURSE ON WHICH YOU TEACH AND ASK YOURSELF IF, IN GENERAL, YOU FEEL YOU ARE TEACHING BELOW, ABOVE OR AT THE APPROPRIATE LEVEL. (IF YOU TEACH ONLY AT HIGHER LEVELS, GET HOLD OF THE APPROPRIATE LEVEL DESCRIPTORS.)

Chances are, all teachers can make a few tweaks to get the level right, so don't feel bad if you think you need to do something! Remember that one module/unit is not expected to cover all the things mentioned in the lists above but, by the end of a level, students should have met every criterion in order to be awarded the appropriate qualification.

QUESTION

- ❖ IT'S LIKELY THAT SOME PEOPLE, ON READING THIS LIST, WILL BE AWARE THEY ARE TEACHING AND/OR ASSESSING AT TOO HIGH A LEVEL, AND NEED TO LOWER EXPECTATIONS. BUT SOME MIGHT SAY THAT LOWERING EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO ACHIEVE IS "DUMBING DOWN". WHAT ARGUMENTS COULD YOU USE TO DISMISS THIS COMPLAINT?

MAKING IT APPROPRIATE TO OUR SUBJECT

The Quality Assurance Agency list above is generic, intended to apply to all degrees equally, and ensure that a degree in, say, History is "worth" the same as a degree in Ceramics. A further list of "benchmarks" for each subject area adds a level of subject specificity to the proceedings and they are well worth getting hold of from the following URLs:

ART AND DESIGN

www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/phase2/artanddesign.htm

COMMUNICATION, MEDIA, FILM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/phase2/communications.htm>

DANCE, DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/phase2/dance.htm>

MUSIC

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/phase2/music.htm>

Read the following case study and try to answer these questions:

- **HOW DOES THIS TUTOR'S CONCEPTION OF "LEVEL" FIT IN WITH THE OFFICIAL DESCRIPTIONS?**
- **WHAT, IF ANY, ALTERATIONS WOULD YOU RECOMMEND?**
- **OTHER THAN SUBJECT LEVEL, WHAT OTHER TYPES OF LEVEL DOES THIS TUTOR IDENTIFY?**

Case Study

My background is in advertising and marketing. I taught in Further and Higher Education for six years, then became a visiting tutor in Higher Education. I had three part-time jobs that made up one full-time job, so I've had a lot of experience as an hourly-paid lecturer teaching at all levels from Higher National Diploma to MA. I've worked in art and design departments at several institutions, mainly in fashion and marketing.

When I started teaching I suddenly had to re-think everything I was doing – my level of working was totally different to the students.

I adapt my style of teaching according to what level the students are on, with a more interactive approach at the lower levels; where concentration levels are lower the students need to be "entertained" more. At MA level there will be more lectures.

In fashion design, for instance, students at the higher level will be expected to do far more preparation on their own, and to do additional reading. At the lower level they will do a lot more observation.

The level impacts on teaching and learning and on assessment. I'd summarise it like this:

FOUNDATION	FOUNDATION DEGREE	DEGREE	Post-graduate
Application Seeing and doing Hands-on	Combination of hands-on and theory	Greater emphasis on theory and application	Theory-based

The amount of interactivity, although it's far greater at the more basic levels, will also depend on the size of the class and the nature of the subject.

I vary the tools I use according to the level, as well as the proportion of teaching time I use them for. I use far more when I'm teaching at the lower levels, and I get the students to bring in examples as well. The kind of visual aids I use are:

- VIDEO
- POWERPOINT (WITH MUSIC)
- OVERHEAD PROJECTOR
- EXAMPLES
- MAGAZINES
- PRODUCTS
- RADIO ADVERTS
- CD-ROM MATERIAL
- INTERNET EXAMPLES

Of course you need to make sure the appropriate aids are available and that they work, I don't take anything for granted!

The students' attention span is very short, so I try to vary the format and bring in variety within sessions. Also I aim to keep material current and find recent things to incorporate, and to pick something that everyone knows about.

I've found it helps to look at the course handbook, so that if the students are in their second year I can see what they did last year or are going to do next

year. If possible I'd speak to someone else who is teaching them. I look at the learning and teaching and assessment materials from previous years so that I can follow on from what's been done already.

Even within classes there are increasingly varied abilities and background or experience. I normally suggest at the beginning that anyone with no or limited knowledge does some background reading to get to the same level as the others. Variable levels of knowledge in the class can also affect group interactions. Students with extra needs also need to be considered – you need to be aware of visual impairment, dyslexia etc.

With increasing numbers of international students in classes they may need additional time. Briefing students on assignments can take longer if English isn't their first language, and some international students may be used to a very different approach to learning and teaching and to assessment. I had three overseas students on a foundation course. They had no previous knowledge of the subject at all. There's always something on in London so we went everywhere. For example, we went to see *James Bond* and looked at the products positioned in the film. We went to art galleries and they collected everything. They had to read a set text, but in the time we had learning became more fun.

When I meet a group of students for the first time I have a dialogue with them to gauge their level of knowledge. Sometimes I've been informed by the course leader, but otherwise I ask the students. When I first started teaching I was sent straight in, so I used a short questionnaire and asked the students, then looked at the course requirements to be sure I was developing work at the right level.

Flexibility is vital

I use the students who have experience to help the others. It makes them feel good. Where students are behind I give suggestions on getting up to speed such as going to the library and using the Internet. When group work is set and students aren't motivated they'll lose out. Peer pressure often helps them to knuckle down in a group.

When there is a high variation in motivation you may need a higher level of control in class exercises, such as by making them part of assessment and giving penalties for lack of contribution. Attendance may be able to be tied in to assessment, but you'll need to check the regulations, what you can do about non-attendance is limited.

My problem has been that my expectations are much higher than the reality; I'm enthusiastic and passionate about my subject so I expect the students to be, and they may not be! I see my role as inspiring and motivating the students. I also try to be approachable and talk to them.

It is important to help the front-runners as well; they may want links and contacts, or to do further studies or a professional qualification. They need to get something out of it too. It's important not to isolate the brighter students. If students are super-motivated, then I'll guide them to relevant sources, contacts and advice.

Sometimes when you have mature students and returners they may have had bad experiences at school. They may have preconceived notions of education, but now they're learning something because they want to and will need encouragement to see that it's different.

Hands-on things work well when you have varied abilities – you could show them an alcoholic drink, for example, and then peel off the layers of understanding like layers of an onion. Break it down into smaller components, like building blocks in stages. This works well with assessment too. I usually think about how I would have liked to be taught or assessed!

Teaching at the Right Level

ABILITY LEVELS

The level descriptors from the QAA refer to “exit points” – the end of a level. But as the case study identified, not all students are at the same level when they start a course. How do you make sure some students catch up without boring the others who are waiting for them?

QUESTION

Imagine for a second that all students could be placed neatly in one of three categories as listed below. For each category try to think of one or two students you teach at the moment. Don’t write their names down, but keep them in mind. Now try to describe the type of teaching style they seem to respond well to, the type of activity they prefer, and the root of their motivation.

This exercise is easier if you are able to discuss individual students with colleagues who teach them as well.

- ❖ **ACADEMIC HIGH FLYERS**
- ❖ **VOCATIONAL SKILL-BASED STUDENTS**
- ❖ **“DISAFFECTED” AND/OR MATURE/INTERNATIONAL**

SUMMARY

All students are different, and enter higher education with different conceptions of their subject, different skills and different motivations.

The QAA level descriptors give us a framework for “threshold” performance – what a student should be able to do in order to pass. We then add on our criteria for the different gradations of pass (percentages, merit, distinction and so on).

Our job as teachers is to aim to get all students to pass standard, irrespective of their starting point. This is not easy – but it’s why we teach!

The use of innovative and varied teaching and assessment methods can help to ensure that teaching is at the right level to support students in their learning, but also that it does not act as a barrier so that students can *exceed* the expectations we hold for them.

FOLLOW-UP NOTES

Copies of level descriptors for all three undergraduate levels are provided if you want to refer to them from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education website www.qaa.ac.uk

Teaching at the Right Level

“TYPES” OF STUDENT

Most lecturers will find it quite easy to recognise at least one example of each “type”. It is crude, but it is only intended as an indication – we’re not suggesting that you should start categorising all students using these terms!

The table below summarises the findings of the research, but try to come up with your own answers before looking at it:

TYPE	MOTIVATION	TEACHING STYLE
Academic high flyers	Learning for learning's sake Like to make connections between different areas	Like to be inspired to go away and find things out Like time to come to conclusions
Vocational skill-based students	Want a job in the area Concentrate on what they see as relevant	Like a warm and paternal approach Need to see where things are leading
“Disaffected”	Previous bad or out of date experience of education, or completely different educational background	Need structure Require lots of attention Highly critical

The key here is to develop different teaching and learning activities to suit different students, so the “high flyers” can attempt independent tasks, leaving teachers free for more face to face teaching with those who need it.

It is the demanding job of a teacher to pitch their sessions at the right level for all of them, not just cater for one group. Many teachers find themselves quite naturally favouring one group over another (or

Teaching at the Right Level

being monopolised against their will!) Incidentally, there is no hierarchy here – each group can contain its fair share of geniuses and more challenging students!

Some tips for coping with different types of student:

- ❖ **ALLOW STUDENTS TO CHOOSE THEIR OWN ASSESSMENT/SUBMISSION METHODS BUT KEEP THE SAME LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA**
- ❖ **DEVELOP PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING THAT ALLOWS FOR DIFFERENT LEVELS OF TUTOR-STUDENT CONTACT**
- ❖ **GIVE STUDENTS AN OUTLINE OF YOUR COURSE INCLUDING MINI SESSION PLANS**
- ❖ **USE GROUP ACTIVITIES TO MIX GROUPS**
- ❖ **CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO TEACH OR SUPPORT EACH OTHER**
- ❖ **VARY APPROACHES WITHIN THE TEACHING PERIOD**

Certificate level (usually end of year 1)

Teaching at the Right Level

The holder of a certificate of higher education will have a sound knowledge of the basic concepts of a subject, and will have learned how to take different approaches to solving problems. He or she will be able to communicate accurately and will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

Students will have demonstrated:

- iii. knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study;
- iv. an ability to present, evaluate, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- e. evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work;
- f. communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments;
- g. undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment; and will have:
- h. qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

Teaching at the Right Level

Intermediate level (Year 2 or HND/Foundation Degree)

Holders of qualifications at this level will have developed a sound understanding of the principles in their field of study, and will have learned to apply those principles more widely. Through this, they will have learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems. Their studies may well have had a vocational orientation, enabling them to perform effectively in their chosen field. They will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

Students will have demonstrated

- i. knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed;
- ii. ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context;
- iii. knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study;
- iv. an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- a. use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis;
- b. effectively communicate information, arguments, and analysis, in a variety of forms, to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively;

Teaching at the Right Level

- c. undertake further training, develop existing skills, and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations; and will have:
- d. qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

Teaching at the Right Level

Honours level (Year 3)

Graduates with a bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the graduate will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The graduate will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate effectively.

An honours graduate should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.

Students will have demonstrated

- i. a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline;
- ii. an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;
- iii. conceptual understanding that enables the student:
 - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; and
 - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or
 - equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;
- iv. an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;
- v. the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (eg refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Teaching at the Right Level

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- a. apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects;
- b. critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem;
- c. communicate information, ideas, problems, and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences; and will have:

qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:

- to the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
- decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts and
- the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature