

Learning settings

Lectures

Seminars

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placements and work-based learning

Open and flexible learning

Group work

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<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn>

Introduction

During your time at university you will encounter a number of different teaching situations and environments, quite how many and of what type will largely depend upon your discipline area and degree programme. In order to get the most out of your studies you must think of each situation as equally important and relevant, take responsibility for your learning and make the most of every learning situation.

Whilst lectures and seminars will play a central role in most degree programmes, increasingly diverse teaching methods and technologies are also being integrated into programmes. This may be for any number of reasons for instance experiential learning through field trips, work placements, laboratory or studio work gives students valuable vocational experience. Open and flexible learning approaches such as video-conferencing and podcasting can enhance the accessibility and overall learning experience.

Lectures

Lectures are usually delivered by a single lecturer to groups of students, up to 250 (on occasions). The lecturer will introduce the topic, highlight relevant points of interest, current debates, and areas of future work. They will use subject specific language and technical terms that you will be expected to become familiar with. Lectures are not designed to give you everything you need to know, they are supposed to act as a starting point and a 'springboard' for further independent studying.

Student interaction in lectures will vary greatly according to the style of the lecturer. Some may talk at great length uninterrupted, whilst others will ask questions, encourage discussion and give students the opportunity to offer their opinions. Whatever the lecturers' style, students are expected to listen, make notes on the key points, and prepare any questions they might have.

Making notes

Few people are able to maintain concentration on what someone is saying whilst also making comprehensive notes. This means that you might have to compromise one or other of these activities. You can listen intently, so you don't miss any of the information, making only brief notes that you will hopefully be able to build upon at a later date. Or you can listen out for the key points, whilst focussing on making more comprehensive notes. There is no right or wrong way, and it is up to you to experiment with different techniques, see study guide 5 on note-making to find what works best for you.

You might consider using a voice recorder or mp3 player to record the lecture; it is polite to ask the lecturer before you do this.

Concentration

If you find it difficult to concentrate during lectures there are some things you might want to consider. Position, whilst it is nice to sit with friends, if they tend to sit where it is difficult for you to see or hear the information, then move closer to the front. Similarly, if you find your concentration regularly interrupted by conversations going on around you, you might want to think about moving to a place where you are better able to concentrate.

Questions

Most lecturers will give students the chance to ask questions at some point, take this opportunity to verify or clarify any points you might not have fully understood. It will be very much harder to do this once the lecturer has gone, and remember others will probably have similar questions or queries.

Attendance

Lectures are a very important part of most university programmes and there is no substitute for attending. Reading or copying notes that others have made, or picking up a textbook will not provide you with the same valuable experience. However, there may be occasions when you are not able to attend lectures. If this happens, you can use another person's notes as a starting point for further reading. Try to obtain details of any work that was set during the lecture and ask the lecturer how you should attempt to fill the gap in your own notes.

Preparation

Prior to attending lectures some preparation can be very valuable. Consult the module/programme handbook, or the lecturer, for information about the lecture series. Alternatively, look back at your notes from the previous lecture. Try to prepare for lectures

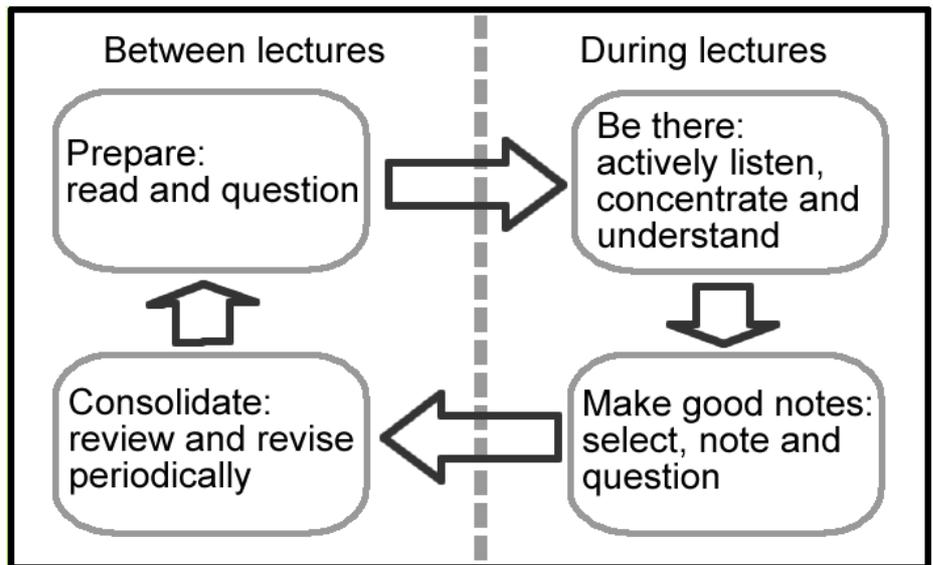
physically and mentally, by ensuring that you have the proper equipment and arrive in a good frame of mind.

Active learning

During lectures think, pose questions, summarise the points being discussed, and generally get enthused about the subject. Such an active approach will mean that you are more likely to learn and understand the material. In contrast, if you spend your time gazing out of the windows, watching the clock, copying things from the board, worrying that you can't understand what is being talked about, you are taking a passive approach, which will mean that you are less likely to gain much from the lecture.

Consider engaging in the following active learning process, which can take place during and between lectures.

Figure 1: Active learning process



After the lecture, allocate time to regularly review, revise and build on your lecture notes to reinforce your understanding of the material. This will cement the information into your long-term memory and benefit you considerably when it comes to revision.

Seminars

Seminars or small group tutorials, like lectures, will vary according to the discipline and degree programme. They usually consist of a meeting between a tutor and a group of between 6 and 30 students. The purpose of seminars is to explore and extend your knowledge of the topics that have been covered in lectures. This may be through in-depth discussion of the key issues, related key texts and articles; differing theories; and current debate. Quite often the tutor will set work or topics in advance for you to research and present to the rest of the group at a later date.

Seminars are a great opportunity for you to practice a number of essential academic and professional skills, such as: discussing your subject with clarity; arguing logically and tactfully; listening to

different points of view; making considered criticisms and comments; and, expressing your opinions and identifying the evidence upon which they are based. As such they offer a great environment for you to develop and hone skills that will be very valuable now and in the future.

As with lectures, you will benefit more from seminars if you prepare in advance and always try to attend. You will find it very hard to find out what you have missed if you are not able to attend, it is very unlikely that there will be a record of the discussions or the information that others have presented during the seminar.

A successful seminar is a collective process, in which the whole group participates and contributes, whether this is through open discussion, researching or presenting information. So try to get involved and even if things don't go well for you, keep this in perspective and try to improve for next time.

Experiential learning: placements and work based learning

Experiential learning or work-based learning is used to describe learning situations where students are given the opportunity to access, utilise and build on their knowledge from practical encounters with the subject being studied. These encounters can come in a number of different forms from long term professional placements, up to a year in some programmes, to short timetabled slots in a studio environment.

Why are placements included in programmes?:

- They give an insight into how theory relates to practice
- They give students the chance to practise and hone specialist skills or equipment
- They help to develop other attributes such as organisational, communication and interpersonal skills

All of these, and others beside, help to give students a deeper understanding of their subject and will appeal to potential future employers.

Recording and reflecting

Most placements will involve some form of report, portfolio or reflective essay on your experience, in which you might be expected to outline and discuss your learning and development. Maintaining a diary, journal or log throughout any placement will therefore be very beneficial, if not required. Get into the habit of thinking, analysing and writing about what is happening, what has gone well and what could have been better. Also think about what you have learned from these experiences and perhaps what you might do differently in the future (see our study guide on reflection).

Not all placements will match your expectations. If you do find

yourself in a situation that is perhaps not ideal, it is important that you still try to make the most of the experience. Leaving a good impression will usually mean positive feedback, which is important for the success of the placement and may also improve your employment prospects.

Other forms of experiential learning include studio work, field work or laboratory work, all of which aim to develop relevant skills, build personal practice and provide professional experience. As with work placements, keep a good record of what takes place in these situations, it will help you a great deal when it comes to writing-up a report. When you do think, reflect and write about the actions and decisions you take, try to think about them critically. Not just describing a chronological order of events, although some of this will be needed. Look to explore why and how you made your choices, what they were based on and what was the impact (see our study guide on critical thinking).

In all of the situations mentioned above it is very important that you prepare well in advance - time is valuable. So make sure that you make best use of the equipment, the people and the whole experience.

Learning and technology

Increasingly programmes are diversifying their delivery and teaching styles, making content more accessible and generally trying to improve the overall student learning experience by incorporating digital technologies. When these are integrated with more traditional teaching methods it is often called 'blended learning' or 'm-learning', which stands for mobile-learning.

Intranets and Virtual Learning Environments

Most programmes make use of an intranet or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as Tulip (Teaching and Learning in Plymouth) here at Plymouth. These can be an invaluable source of information and materials and might include lecture notes, key texts, programme handbooks and calendars, and assignment briefs. Your tutor might also use it as a communication channel with the class. It is therefore important that you become familiar with checking and accessing it regularly. Make sure that you have access to the correct module pages, and if not get in touch with your tutor or programme administrators.

Whilst VLEs and intranets act as access points or vehicles for a wide range of materials, how these are presented or used can vary greatly. Many will be simple text documents while others may be audio or video files, or online exercises. Most are supplementary, intended for independent study and are not supposed to replace lectures. The great benefit is that you can return and revisit them when you want. Some tutors might monitor how often students visit their module pages, and even get in touch with you if they see little or no activity, whilst others will leave it entirely up to you.

Video conferencing and webcasts

Technologies such as video conferencing or webcasts might be used instead of, or during, some lectures. These enable lectures to be delivered remotely, to a number of sites at the same time. Interaction with the presenter in these circumstances can vary. When video conferencing, short breaks might be allocated for questions or they might be kept until the end. Webcasts generally have ongoing discussion boards or chat-rooms to encourage discussion at the same time as the presentation.

Blogs and wikis

Some programmes might facilitate and encourage the use of blogs or wikis. These can be set up by staff or by groups of students who want to share ideas and work together. Blogs (web-logs) are predominantly used for discussions and provide opportunities to air opinions on key topics. They may be 'controlled' by the tutor. Before posting on a blog it is important to think about what you want to say and how it might be interpreted. Always try to respect others' opinions and never make personal attacks. It is OK to criticise ideas but not individuals. Think before you click.

Wikis are set up to enable students to contribute to a shared document, site or file. It is the students' responsibility to upload information and content that they feel is significant and useful. The tutor might maintain editorial rights or even hand this over to the class. The 'goal' or end point of the wiki is a shared document or file that gives a comprehensive coverage of a specific subject. As it is collaboratively built by a number of people, all with differing views and opinions, it can provide a very rich learning experience and end product.

As with experiential learning it is important that you try to engage with whatever technology, system or process on offer. Quite often it is better to try and immerse yourself into anything that is new to you rather than 'sit on the edge' and just 'dip your toe in'.

Group Work

Group work is an important part of the student learning experience, and more programmes than ever before are incorporating it into their curriculum. There are a number of reasons why group work is so important:

- We are interdependent learners, our learning is most effective when we watch, share, discuss and use knowledge collectively with our peers
- Many of the key benefits of group work match skills employers are looking for in graduates, such as communication, working with other people and presenting information
- Group work can help develop essential personal skills such as listening, assertiveness, persuasion and compromise
- It can also enable much larger and more comprehensive projects to be completed, than would be possible individually

However, students can be resistant to group work for any number of reasons, such as:

- Some prefer to work on their own, lacking experience and confidence when it comes to working with others
- Others may feel that they end up responsible for large portions of the workload and 'carry' other members of the group

If groups are set up and run well there are rarely any significant problems, and the overall experience and sense of achievement can be overwhelmingly positive.

Whether your group work involves a short presentation and discussion in a seminar setting, or conducting field work on a wind-swept beach, here are some tips that should be relevant in almost all group work situations:

Individually:

- Always try to be enthusiastic and committed
- Be assertive and express your ideas, but be prepared to listen and compromise too
- Be tactful and diplomatic, never heckle or bully others
- Consider and respect others' social, cultural and human needs

Collectively:

- Set and maintain ground rules
- Before starting consider your collective strengths and weaknesses, try a SWOT analysis
- Establish clear agendas and objectives

Much research has been conducted on how effective groups or teams operate. Belbin's (2010) research observed teams in a number of environments, and found that individuals generally fulfil one or two roles when we are placed in a team, each role having certain characteristics, benefits and possible weaknesses. Adair (1987) looked at how teams develop, and found that they often go through stages of forming; storming; norming; before finally, performing.

Assessment of group work can vary greatly according to the nature of the assignment, marks may be awarded for the group as whole or individually. In some cases you might have to assess each other, it is therefore important to get on, work well together and make the most of this opportunity.

For more information on group work see www.learnhigher.ac.uk

References

Adair, J. (1987) *Effective team building: how to make a winning team* (14th ed.). London: Pan Books

Belbin (2010) *Belbin team role theory*. Available at: www.belbin.com (Accessed: 1st July 2010).

Recommended reading

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2008) *Essential Study Skills: the complete guide to success at university* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Northedge, A. (2005) *The Good Study Guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Race, P. (2007) *How to Get a Good Degree: making the most of your time at university* (2nd ed.) Maidenhead: Open University Press.

For further information and the full range of study guides go to: <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn>

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