

# Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

Centre for Excellence in  
Teaching and Learning, The  
UWI Mona



## Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and a summer edition. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online (<http://mona.uwi.edu/cetl>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices please contact us.

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## Clarifying confusion in your classroom

Oftentimes as university teachers, we teach a class and from the bland expressions on the faces of our students, we know we have lost them. When we ask questions, seeking a response from the students to properly gauge their understanding and they appear distanced and unresponsive, we know they don't understand. In a typical class, eventually someone might respond and indicate lack of clarity on an issue or total lack of understanding of all that was taught. What do you do? Here are some suggestions.

### *Reteach*

It might be appropriate to reteach. This will call for you to go slowly over the subject matter content, taking time to explain concepts, checking for understanding as you go along and clarifying concepts where there is an expressed need for this.

### *Use examples*

It is also good to use as many examples as possible. The use of examples often makes teaching and learning come alive. The use of good examples have multiple roles in teaching and learning since they often act as a hook, connecting learner and concept in unique ways and in the process, opening the door for understanding as confusion is dispelled.

### *You might need to use a metaphor*

A metaphor helps to connect something you know with something you don't know. They are really powerful learning devices. In that regard, they can have a very positive impact on student learning, clarifying confusion and leading to greater levels of understanding. They are able to do this because they allow for connections to be made between ideas.

### *Get them talking*

A good way to help students make better sense of course content is to get them to talk to each other. Share ideas, clarify concepts for each other and resolve confusion. So challenge them to talk about the content they are learning. You might also want to create talking points to help them ease into this activity.

### *Get them to ask questions*

Get them to work in pairs and come up with questions on the muddiest point or the one thing they think might help to clarify their confusion and lead to greater understanding of the concept they are having difficulties with.

### *Get students who think they understand the concept to share*

Oftentimes, some students will understand the concept that others are having difficulty with. Encourage those students to share, telling others how they came to grips with the concept. Of course, there might be some inaccuracies and some imprecision in their explanations but these should be considered as ways and means of opening the door to understanding. You will need to offer additional clarifications as the details of their explanations are reviewed, expanded or further engaged.

### *Suggest additional helpful resources*

There might be useful explanations in the assigned text or other textbooks or online that you might want to share with your students. Point them to these and tell them why you think these explanations are great.

### *Exercise patience*

As the teacher, you must exercise patience as students take time to come to grips with difficult concepts. Please don't allow your frustration to get the better of you. Always remember that you are the teacher and you have a responsibility to create learning opportunities to advance your students.

### *Pause, reflect, return & revisit*

Sometimes you might have to take a break, pause and reflect on what has been happening in the class. Ask yourself, "why are they not getting it?" Is it because the knowledge that you need to build on is non-existent or inappropriate? Try to figure it out. You might also reflect on what has happened in your class and what are the takeaways? There might be things to do differently

## Clarifying confusion in your classroom Contd

next time and of course, what worked? You might want to decide on how to use those things that worked again. Remember, there are times when you will have to leave things right where they are and return to them later, perhaps when students are more receptive and prepared to engage them again.

## Striving for an Equitable Classroom

Striving for an equitable classroom is about teaching all the students in your classroom. It is not just about teaching those who are motivated, engaged, participating and highly invested in the class. Equity is about structuring the classroom in such a way that fairness is achieved, creating opportunities for all students to participate and making the classroom a really inclusive one, where all can feel welcome and are empowered to construct knowledge so that learning really happens. The question is, how might university teachers structure the learning environment to respond to this objective of developing equitable classrooms? Tanner (2013) has provided some teaching and learning strategies that are very helpful in structuring the learning environment. They are organized into five themes representing overarching goals of university teachers. A modified version is as follows:

- Giving all students opportunities to think and talk about course content
- Encouraging, demanding, and actively managing the participation of all students
- Building an inclusive and fair classroom community for all students
- Monitoring behaviour to cultivate divergent thinking
- Teaching all of the students in your classroom

These equitable teaching strategies can be read and utilised in any order. The table below provides information about the strategies and for you to decide which ones you already use, which ones you are most interested in reading more about and which ones are you willing to try in your classroom?

### Self-assessment of equitable teaching strategies

*Giving all students opportunities to think and talk about course content*

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Wait time

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Allow students time to write

- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Think-pair-share  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4. Do not try to do too much

*Encouraging, demanding, and actively managing the participation of all students*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Hand raising  
\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Multiple hands, multiple voices  
\_\_\_\_\_ 7. Random calling using popsicle sticks/  
index cards  
\_\_\_\_\_ 8. Assign reporters for small groups  
\_\_\_\_\_ 9. Whip (around)  
\_\_\_\_\_ 10. Monitor student participation

*Building an inclusive and fair classroom community for all students*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Learn or have access to students' names  
\_\_\_\_\_ 12. Integrate culturally diverse and relevant examples  
\_\_\_\_\_ 13. Work in stations or small groups  
\_\_\_\_\_ 14. Use varied active-learning strategies  
\_\_\_\_\_ 15. Be explicit about promoting access and equity for all students

*Monitoring (your own and students') behaviour to cultivate divergent thinking*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Ask open-ended questions  
\_\_\_\_\_ 17. Do not judge responses  
\_\_\_\_\_ 18. Use praise with caution  
\_\_\_\_\_ 19. Establish classroom community and norms

*Teaching all of the students in your classroom*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Teach them from the moment they arrive  
\_\_\_\_\_ 21. Collect assessment evidence from every student, every class

Spaces to the left of each strategy can be used to indicate: N = never used; O = use occasionally; R = use regularly; W = would like to try!

### Reference

Tanner, K. (2013) Structure matters: Twenty-one teaching strategies to promote student engagement and cultivate classroom equity. *CBE-Life Sciences Education*, 12, 322-331.

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