

Survival Guide to Teaching in Higher Education

Teach Well – an introductory guide

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Contents:

1. [Introduction.](#)
2. [Planning & Resourcing Learning in HE.](#)
3. [Understanding Student Learning.](#)
4. [Assessing Student Learning.](#)
5. [Teaching Models and Styles of Delivery.](#)
6. [Evaluating Teaching & Learning.](#)

1. *Introduction*

This guide has been designed to help those who are new to teaching in Higher Education (HE). The contents include basic guidance on how to plan and resource teaching sessions and goes on to examine fundamental issues in 'understanding students as learners', 'teaching models and styles of delivery', 'assessment' and the 'evaluation of teaching and learning'.

The sample pack includes activities, which readers should undertake as they progress through the materials. There is also a 'further reading' list, providing further information on a specific issue or topic.

2. Planning, Managing & Resourcing Learning

Planning Learning

We may consider the planning and Resourcing of learning in Higher Education (HE) at different levels. At the highest level we may be involved in planning a programme leading to an award, for example, a B.A. (Honours) programme, a M.Sc. programme or a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher and Professional Education (PGCHPE) programme. Most of these programmes are made up of modules and these may vary in size, for example, some may be worth 15 credits, while others may be 30 credits. On some programmes such as Masters Degree's, we may find 60 credit modules, while some universities offer 10 credit modules and others offer 20 credit units. Within each programme and modules are a number of 'learning outcomes', which it is hoped that learners will achieve as they progress through the module.

With these learning outcomes in mind, individual learning sessions must be planned to provide opportunities for learners to meet the outcomes and this normally culminates in some kind of assessment task, which allows

module tutors to ascertain whether individuals have attained the standard required for a pass grade when matched to criteria related to the learning outcomes. As lecturers or facilitators, we may be involved at all stages of the planning process or just one session or part of a session, which contributes to the modular programme. This section of the survival guide sample pack will focus on the planning of individual sessions, which is something that all practitioners with a teaching input will need to do.

Planning a Learning Session

There are many aspects to consider when planning a learning session for higher education students and it goes without saying that proficient pre-planning is crucial if the session is to provide a successful learning experience for ALL students. Pause for a moment and attempt the activity below:



Consider the planning of a lesson in higher education. List ALL the factors and elements that you think are relevant during the planning process. Spend about 10 minutes on this activity.

You probably came up with quite a lengthy list of factors and elements and though it is probably not possible to

produce a definitive list due to the diverse nature of subject content and contextual issues, certain elements will be fairly standard. Certainly, we need aims and objectives and these should be discussed with the students at the outset of the session. Also, we need some method of ascertaining whether the aims and objectives have been accomplished, this will almost certainly involve some sort of formative assessment or may simply be embedded in the process of delivery through questioning or observation. The structure of the session should be planned – some practitioners plan their sessions minute by minute, others simply map out the main parts of the session, for example, 'Introduction (including aims, objectives & topic relevance) - 10 minutes', 'Topic development (PowerPoint) – 15 minutes', 'Student centred activity – 15 minutes' and so on.... The way this is done is largely down to individuals and their personal preference.

So, what other factors and elements are important? We would need to know some general information, for example, 'What is the entry level of the students', what is the student profile (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity, disabilities etc.), how many students are there, what accommodation and facilities are available? The answers to these and similar questions are crucial if we are to successfully accommodate our full range of learners. We should also

consider what type of learning resources we are going to provide. Most students consider paper-based handouts mandatory and they also expect a copy of any PowerPoint slides that are used with some space for notes etc.

Additionally we may provide all materials in electronic format through the university [Virtual Learning Environment \(VLE\)](#) ('Blackboard'). By adopting this approach we may set up an electronic 'content repository' to support learners on a particular module and may also take advantage of the discussion tools, which allow us to create [synchronous and asynchronous forums](#) around subject specific topics. Other resources for consideration include contemporary research papers relating to the session outcomes, for example, wikis, blogs and web-links to appropriate sites and formative assessment activities, which may also serve the purpose of reinforcing, consolidating and evaluating learning. Sample forms to aid programme and session planning are included as appendices 1 & 2 to this section of the guide materials and these are supplemented by a session evaluation form (appendix 3) and a critical incident/reflective journal proforma (appendix 4).

Appendix 1: Scheme of Work / Programme Outline.

Subject:

Group:

Year:

Week	Date	Topic	Teaching methods to be used	Additional comments e.g. Learner needs to be considered, resource issues
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				

Appendix 2: Session Plan.

Date	Subject and level	Number of students
Duration	Topic	Room

Learning objectives:

Time	Development of theme	Method	Resources

Appendix 3: Evaluation of Own Teaching.

Subject / Level / Group:

Method(s) used to collect evaluation comments:

Summary of evaluation comments:

Changes to and/or consolidation of practice considered as a result of evaluation:

Further reading:

Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university (2nd edition)*. Maidenhead. Open University Press.

Light, G. & Cox, R. (2002) *Learning and teaching in higher education* London. Paul Chapman Publishing.

Reece, I. & Walker, S. (2006) *Teaching, training and learning (6th edition)*. Sunderland. Business Education Publishers Ltd.

3. Understanding Students as Learners.

The major influences on individual learners may be conveniently considered under three main headings – psychological, physical and social. The complex interactions between factors make each individual learner unique. To deliver a successful learning experience it is essential that we view each group as an assortment of inimitable individuals all with their own blend of strengths, weaknesses, features and characteristics. Figure (i) gives examples of some factors that are commonly acknowledged under each of the three main categories:

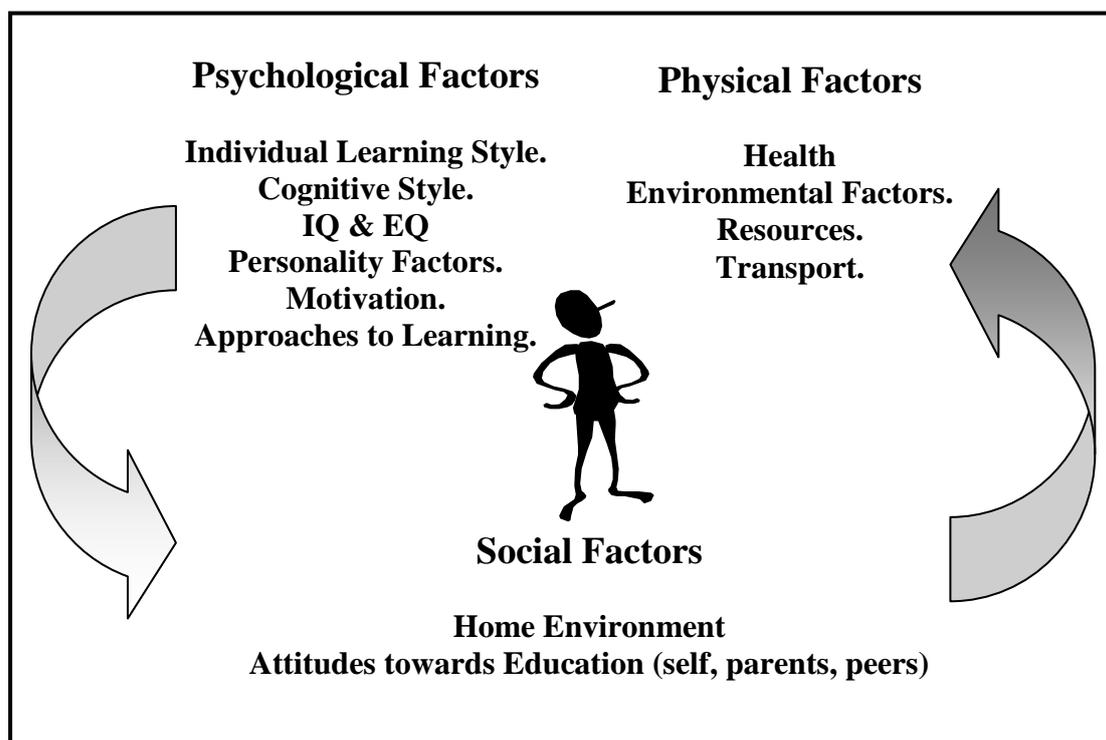


Figure (i)

For the purposes of this sample pack we shall be focusing on the psychological factors that are thought to influence the individual learning experience and which require your attention when planning and delivering programmes in Higher Education.

Individual Learning Styles.

One of the best-known and often quoted analyses of learning styles is that devised by Honey and Mumford (1982). Honey and Mumford designed a technique based on an 80 item " Learning Styles Questionnaire" which aims to classify learners into 4 different groups – activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. The characteristics associated with each type of learner are specified below:

Activists

Activists tend to involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences:

- They enjoy the here and now and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences.
- They are open-minded, not sceptical and this tends to make them enthusiastic about anything new.
- Their philosophy is: 'I'll try anything once.'

- They tend to act first and consider the consequences afterwards.
- Their days are filled with activity.
- They tackle problems by brainstorming.
- As soon as the excitement from one activity has died down they are busy looking for the next.
- They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer term consolidation.
- They are gregarious people constantly involving themselves with others but, in doing so, they seek to centre all activities around themselves.

Reflectors

Reflectors like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from different perspectives:

- They collect data, both first hand and from others, and prefer to think about it thoroughly before coming to any conclusion.
- The thorough collection and analysis of data about experiences and events is what counts so they tend to postpone reaching definitive conclusions for as long as possible.
- Their philosophy is to be cautious.

- They are thoughtful people who like to consider all possible angles and implications before making a move.
- They prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They enjoy observing other people in action.
- They listen to others and get the drift of the discussion before making their own points.
- They tend to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant, tolerant unruffled air about them.
- When they act it is part of a wide picture which includes the past as well as the present and others' observations as well as their own.

Theorists

Theorists adapt and integrate observations into complex but logically sound theories:

- They think problems through in a vertical, step by step logical way.
- They assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories.
- They tend to be perfectionists who won't rest easy until things are tidy and fit into a rational scheme.
- They like to analyse and synthesise.
- They are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking.

- Their philosophy prizes rationality and logic i.e. 'If it's logical it's good'. Questions they frequently ask are 'Does it make sense?' 'How does this fit with that?' 'What are the basic assumptions?'
- They tend to be detached, analytical and dedicated to rational objectivity rather than anything subjective or ambiguous.
- Their approach to problems is consistently logical. This is their 'mental set' and they rigidly reject anything that does not fit with it.
- They prefer to maximise certainty and feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements, lateral thinking and anything flippant.

Pragmatists

Pragmatists are keen on trying out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice:

- They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications.
- They like to get on with things and act quickly and confidently on ideas that attract them.
- They tend to be impatient with ruminating and open-ended discussions.
- They are essentially practical, down to earth people who like making practical decisions and solving problems.

- They respond to problems and opportunities 'as a challenge'.
- Their philosophy is: 'There is always a better way' and 'If it works it's good'.

It should be understood that no individual has one single learning style but the majority of learners have displayed *a preference* for one or more of the styles that have been identified. As a lecturer in Higher Education it is your aim to try and make learners more adaptable so that each individual may switch between styles as appropriate. We may achieve this goal through the way we design learning encounters and by setting tasks and assignments that encourage the use of all four styles.



Consider the characteristics of the four different types of learner outlined above. Which style best matches you as an individual or do you consider yourself to be a mix of several different styles? How do you intend to accommodate all the different types of learner in your teaching groups?

Further reading:

Dunn, R. & Griggs, S.A. (2000) *Practical approaches to using learning styles in higher education*. Westport (USA). Greenwood Publishing Group plc.

Honey, P. & Mumford, A. (1986) *The Manual of Learning Styles*. Maidenhead: Peter Honey.

Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs: N.J. 07632 Prentice Hall Inc.

Cognitive Style.

It is both possible and necessary to distinguish between a person's individual learning style and their cognitive style.

It is thought that an individual's cognitive style is more genetically orientated than their individual learning style and as such is more difficult to manipulate. Consider two individual learners sitting in your lecture. As you talk to the group, one of the individuals visualises what you are saying in their minds eye in words, however, the other individual visualises what you are saying in pictures.

These two contrasting cognitive styles and the different ways in which these two individuals are experiencing your lecture has profound implications for the ultimate success or failure of the learning experience. One of these individuals is what Riding, S. (1991) described as a 'verbaliser' and the other is what he described as an

'imager'. In reality it is likely that most learners will fall somewhere in between these two extremes, even so, achieving effective communication with all members of a group requires presentations and handouts that satisfy the needs of the two contrasting styles.

Consider another scenario. During a learning encounter you are explaining each stage of the 'research process'. You decide to look at each stage of the process in detail and as you have two weeks to spend on this topic you will look at half the research process this week and the remaining half next week. Some your students are very comfortable with this arrangement as they are what Riding describes as 'analytic learners'. These learners like to break new material down into small chunks and then tackle each part in sequence until they have studied the whole concept. However, the other learners in the group quickly lose their way, these learners are what Riding calls 'wholists' and they like to keep a global overview on the whole process as they learn new concepts and ideas otherwise they have difficulty establishing the links between the constituent parts. Again, it is likely that most learners within a group will fall somewhere between these two extremes, even so, failure to accommodate all styles by adopting delivery methods that satisfy individual needs

will undoubtedly diminish the learning experience for many individuals.

Accommodating learners with differing cognitive styles requires a great deal of thought when designing presentations, handouts and learning programmes and it is reasoned that cognitive style issues become even more significant when planning, designing or [delivering programmes in blended or distance formats](#). In practice we must assume that any learning group within HE will comprise individuals from each of the cognitive style categories and we should plan for this scenario. For further information on Cognitive Styles browse the list of [scholarly articles](#), this may be accessed by following the link.



Design a handout to support your teaching, which is appropriate for learners with differing cognitive learning styles. Gather feedback from students on the suitability of your handout and revise your work to reflect their views.

Further reading:

Rayner, S., Riding, R.J. (1997) Towards a categorisation of cognitive styles and learning styles. *Educational Psychology*, Vol.17, N^o 1 & 2. 1997. (Pages 5 - 17)

Riding, R.J. (1991) *Cognitive Styles Analysis*, Birmingham: Learning and Training Technology.

Riding, R.J. and Cheema, I. (1991) Cognitive styles-an overview and integration. *Educational Psychology*, Vol. 11, pp 193 – 215.

Sternberg, R.J. & Zhang, L.F. (2001) *Perspectives on thinking, learning and cognitive styles*. Mahwah. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Approaches to Learning.

It is increasingly acknowledged that individual students will adopt different approaches to their learning. Studies by Marton and Saljo (1984) aimed to distinguish the link between tasks, which were set for students, and their approaches to it. Biggs (1987) and Ramsden (2003) have furthered this earlier work, and have suggested that the level of engagement adopted by students is closely linked to their approach (incorporating their intentions and motivation). The studies by Biggs and Ramsden indicate that the way in which students approach their studies may

be more dependent upon the context or situation rather than other innate personal characteristics. Four distinct categories have been identified:

<p>Non-academic approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intends to have a good social life only • Disorganised • Minimal personal effort • Generalises and tends to reach conclusions without sufficient evidence
<p>Surface approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intends to complete task requirements • Treats study as an external imposition • Unreflective about why something is worth doing • Focuses on discrete elements without making linkages or integration • Fails to distinguish principles from examples • Memorises information needed for assessment
<p>Strategic approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intends to obtain the highest possible grades • Gears work to perceived preferences of the lecturer • Very aware of marking schemes and assessment criteria • Systematic use of previous papers in revision • Organises time and effort to greatest effect • Ensures the right conditions and materials for study
<p>Deep approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intends to understand the subject • Vigorous interaction with content • Relates new ideas to previous knowledge • Relates concepts to everyday experience • Relates evidence to conclusions • Examines the logic of the argument

As lecturers in Higher Education it is our duty to encourage 'deep approaches' to learning through the ways we deliver and augment learning experiences in our own subject areas. The way we design and facilitate learning experiences will have a huge influence on student approaches.



Think of your own learning on a previous programme. What type of activities led to you engaging with a 'deep' approach to learning? Think back to an occasion when you adopted a 'surface' approach. What factors led to this scenario? Compare the two experiences and think of ways that you can plan learning experiences for your students to encourage 'deep' learning.

Further Reading:

Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university (2nd edition)*. Maidenhead. Open University Press.

4. Assessing Student Learning.

Introduction

Assessment in Higher Education has been through a period of total transformation during the past 15 years. Paper and pen examinations and 'university finals', which once determined the results of an entire 3 year degree course have become largely obsolete as new and innovative forms of assessment have taken over. Around this quantum leap in assessment policy and practice a new language has emerged, which is now an integral part of school and curriculum documentation and which without elucidation has the capacity to confuse all but the most seasoned practitioner. For the purposes of this sample pack, it seems appropriate to begin with a short glossary of commonly used idiolect, which should provide a useful source of reference for all who choose or need to use it.

Formative Assessment is largely considered to be 'continuous' throughout the process of teaching and learning. Biggs, J. (2003) suggests that the results of formative assessment are used for 'feedback' during the learning process and he goes on to stress that the information gained from such assessment activity should

not only be used to “improve the learning of individual students” (page 141) but should also be used to “improve teaching”. Reece, I. & Walker, S. (2007) agree with Biggs describing formative assessment as “on-going throughout the learning process” (page 586) and also noting that it is the type of assessment “to help teaching and learning” (page 586). For our purposes then, we may consider formative assessment to be that used as part of the teaching and learning process. It may be of either a formal or informal nature but is always designed to inform individual learning and enhance the practice of teaching.

Summative Assessment is somewhat different to that described above as its sole purpose is to either grade students or provide some sort of basis for certification. Biggs, J. (2003) defines Summative assessment as that used to “grade students at the end of a unit, or to accredit at the end of a programme” (page 141). This concurs with the definition offered by the ['Google Web-Definition Service'](#), which states that Summative assessment is:

“an assessment that is done at the conclusion of a course or some larger instructional period (e.g. at the end of the program). The purpose is to determine

success or to what extent the
program/project/course met its goals”.

(accessed 15th September 2006)

For our purposes then, summative assessment will be defined as that used at the end of a module or programme of study with the sole purpose of grading students or providing some basis for an award.

Criterion Referenced Assessment: When we look at the types of assessment instruments that are commonly used for educational purposes, we can generally classify them into two main groups: criterion-referenced assessments and norm-referenced assessments. Linn, R.L. and Gronlund, N.E. (2000) define these two types of assessments in the following way:

"Norm-Referenced Assessment: A test or other type of assessment designed to provide a measure of performance that is interpretable in terms of an individual's relative standing in some known group.

Criterion-Referenced Assessment: A test or other type of assessment designed to provide a measure of performance that is interpretable in terms of a clearly defined and delimited domain of learning tasks." (p. 42).

These helpful definitions highlight the fundamental difference between the two models. Norm-referencing, which until the 1980s was used for virtually all educational assessments, was largely a method of categorizing learners into some sort of rank order, this then made it easy to place individuals into grade bands A, B, C, D, E.....etc. It is based on mathematical principles and once applied leaves little scope for argument as to who should be where. Even so, inherent in the norm-referencing system are many flaws, for example placing a group in rank order is simple enough but the system tells us nothing about the ability of the group as a whole as compared to another group who may also have been placed in rank order. To take an extreme view, the person who was ranked bottom in one group may well have come top in different group depending on the overall ability of the cohort. This means that a person who was awarded an 'E' grade may well have been given a higher grade had they been in a different cohort. A performance gaining a 'B' grade in an examination one year may well have only attained a 'C' grade the previous year and so on and so forth. For these reasons criterion-referenced assessment grew in popularity during the latter part of the 20th century and is now used almost exclusively on FE and HE programmes.

Linn, R.L. and Gronlund, N.E. (2000) go on to note:

"...criterion-referenced tests include items that are directly relevant to the learning outcomes to be measured, without regard to whether the items can be used to discriminate among students. No attempt is made to eliminate easy items or alter their difficulty. If the learning tasks are easy, then test items will be easy. The goal of the criterion-referenced test is to obtain a description of the specific knowledge and skills each student can demonstrate. This information is useful for planning both group and individual instruction." (p. 43)

"Criterion-referenced interpretations can be made in various ways. For example, we can (1) describe the specific learning tasks a student is able to perform (e.g., counts from 1 to 100), (2) indicate the percentage of tasks a student performs correctly (e.g., spells 65 percent of the words in the word list), or (3) compare the test performance to a set performance standard and decide whether the student meets a given standard (e.g., performed at the proficient level). (p. 43).

To summarise, though norm-referenced assessment continues to be used for some business and professional examinations, in Higher Education the system is to all

intents and purposes obsolete¹. Criterion-referenced forms of assessment, which link appraisal activities to learning outcomes and provide ALL learners with an equal chance of passing the assessment, have become standard practice for the vast majority of HE purposes.

Validity: When we evaluate the validity of an assessment, we are asking the question – does the assessment measure what it is supposed to measure? There are many aspects to validity, for example, educationalists will sometimes refer to ‘construct validity’, which refers to the suitability of the assessment for the purpose it is being used, or ‘content validity’, which relates to how well the assessment maps to the learning outcomes. When we design assessment activities, validity is paramount if we are to facilitate a successful learning experience; in short, validity has become one of the primary considerations in evaluating whether an assessment scheme is appropriate for a particular purpose, and indeed, what its limitations are in achieving that purpose.

Reliability: The concept of reliability relates to the consistency of the assessment in terms of results. We may consider two questions, firstly, if two different

¹ Norm-referencing may still be used in some Higher Education contexts to classify students (i.e. Distinction, merit, pass etc.).

members of staff conducted the assessment with the same student would they both come up with the same result? Secondly, if the same student took the same assessment on consecutive days would they attain the same result? If we cannot answer yes to each of these questions then the assessment would be considered to lack 'reliability'.

Validity and reliability are irrevocably linked. If an assessment lacks reliability then it also lacks validity. However, reliability does not guarantee validity, a test may be capable of providing reliable test results but this does not mean that the assessment is suitable for its purpose or that it measures what it is supposed to measure. In essence, a test can be reliable without being valid but it cannot be valid without being reliable. Figure (ii) overleaf provides a summary of common assessment terminology:

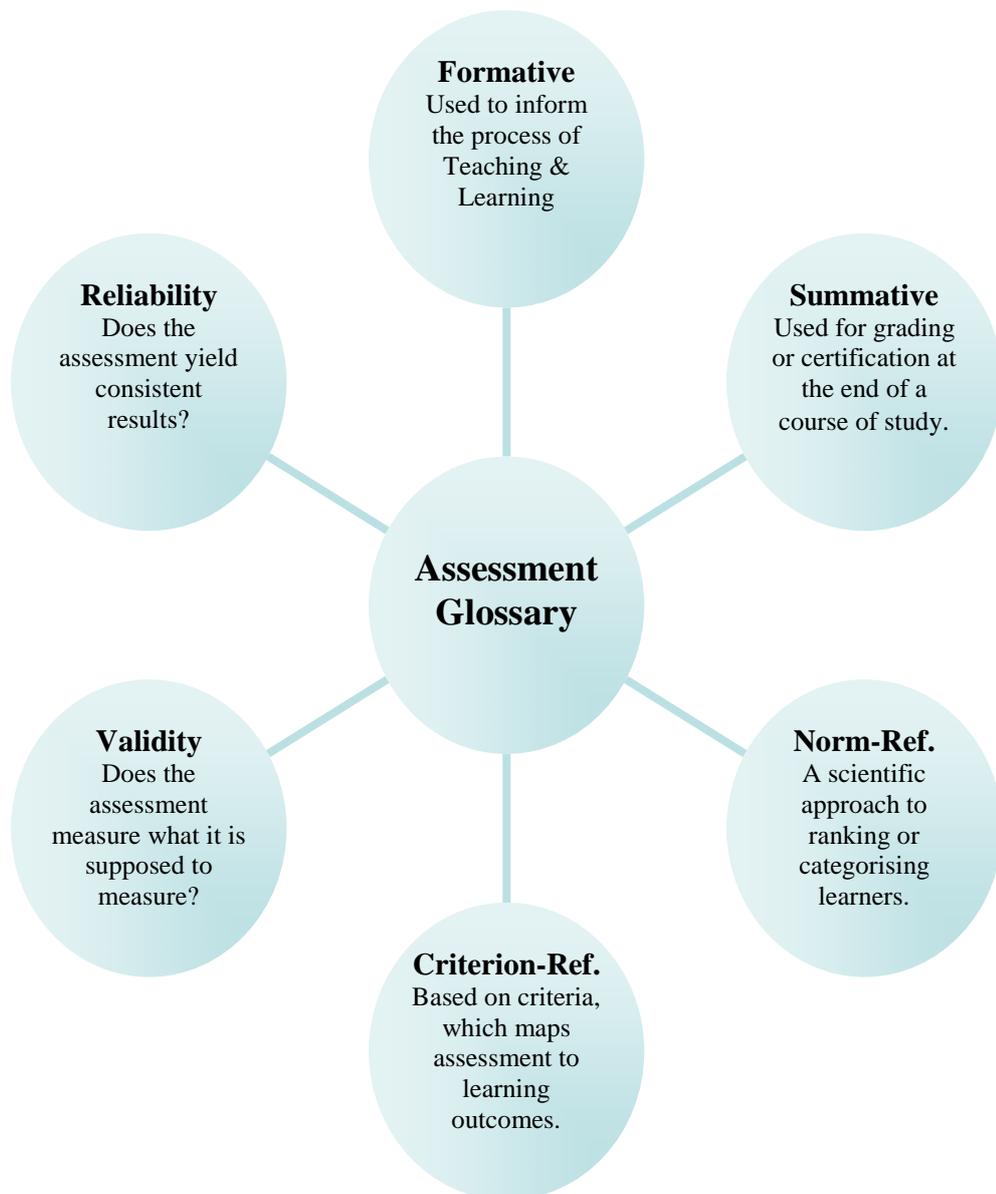


Figure (ii)

Assessment Techniques

The scope for innovative assessment practices has grown enormously as new technology has evolved and tutors have embraced criterion-referenced approaches. Students now expect a diverse and interesting range of assessment activities both as part of their learning experience and at the end of a programme of study. In this section of the sample pack we shall consider some of the techniques that have become popular in higher education during the past 5 years.



Construct a table with 5 columns and 10 rows. In column 1 list all the different types of assessment that you have experienced as a student. Label them as 'formative', 'summative', 'norm-referenced' and 'criterion referenced' and comment on the value of the experience in terms of teaching and learning. A smaller table is provided below as an example:

Sample Table:

Assessment Type.	Formative	Summative	Norm-Ref.	Criterion-Ref.	Remarks
Examination		√	√		Seemed unfair – some of the group who were very competent got 'E' grades
Presentation	√			√	A good learning experience.
Multiple Choice Test		√		√	Got result very quickly but no feedback other than mark.

Filling in your table probably brought back quite a lot of memories (both positive and negative) about your assessment experiences. The fact that you are here, working for Staffordshire University, suggests that you have enjoyed considerable success during your educational career. Despite your accomplishments, however, reflect for a moment on the assessment activities you experienced and consider how many of them actually enhanced your learning? Summative, end of module assessments can certainly be a motivator, but do they encourage the correct type of learning? Many students have the ability to 'cram' for an examination and achieve good grades, however, a short time later very little is retained and 'understanding' is normally minimal. Formative assessment should be far more beneficial as far as learning is concerned. Nonetheless, for many students 'formative' means 'voluntary' and often, what should be a rich educational experience fails to materialise. To make matters worse, it is normally the students who would benefit the most who opt out and miss these valuable educational opportunities. So how may we encourage students to take formative assessment seriously and engage with these important activities? One way is to make assessments innovative and interesting so that they appeal to ALL learners regardless of their individual

characteristics. Below are some ideas for a contemporary approach to assessment, which may help in achieving this aim.

Webquests:

The use of 'webquests' has become widespread in higher education during the past few years. The advantage of webquests as an assessment tool is that they are relatively easy to design, simple to update and may be individualized to suit particular students. The [Google Web Definition Service](#) offers a helpful description of the webquest model; this is reproduced below for convenience:

"An inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by students is online. By providing links necessary to complete the quest, the student is able to focus on the material rather than spend time looking for it. The five-part WebQuest (Introduction, Task, Resources, Process, Evaluation, and Conclusion) promotes critical thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation".

(accessed 20th September 2012)

Webquests may be developed using a variety of software packages including 'Microsoft Word'. In essence, the design of webquests requires a pragmatic approach on the part of the creator. Click on the link to view an [example of](#)

[a webquest](#). This, of course, is just one example of an infinite number that have been developed by practitioners in all phases of education. It is not offered as an exemplar or even as an example of good practice, but what it does show is an everyday use of the webquest tool in an attempt to enhance teaching and learning. Many other examples are available on the web including those that may be accessed by following the link to Webquest.org which contains many examples and design tips.



Using either Microsoft word or alternative software of your choice, design a 'webquest' for use with a group of HE students in your subject area. Pilot the webquest with a suitable cohort and write a reflective evaluation to inform your future practice.

Role Play:

Role play for assessment purposes may take many forms. It is commonly used in such contexts as 'Health & Science', where one person is asked to simulate a patient, while the person being assessed deals with a predefined situation. It can also be used where a candidate is being assessed in a business context, perhaps assessing a candidate's business etiquette or use of technical language during a meeting. One particular 'role play'

used in a 'Law School' at a university in the West Midlands is provided here. The Law tutor set up a hypothetical situation in which two students were asked to take on the roles of a husband and wife who were negotiating a divorce settlement. A third individual took on the role of a solicitor and the three participants communicated entirely through e-mail. At the end of the assessment exercise the tutor was able to print out the entire transcript of all the communications that had taken place and from that evidence was able to assess such qualities as professional etiquette, use of language, knowledge of relevant laws and legislation and other relevant aspects of good practice. Feedback was both verbal and written taking the form of a group discussion supported by the record of events and later individual written feedback that outlined strengths, weaknesses and areas for development.

The example described above outlines an approach to assessment, which could be used in either a formative or summative context. Role play assessment practices are not confined to particular disciplines, for example, foreign language students have benefited from similar assessment activities, particularly where tutors wish to integrate the teaching of language and culture (see [Maria A. Kodotchigova's](#) research paper - accessed September 21st 2006). Kodotchigova offers a 6 step approach to

designing role play activities, which may be transferable to other subject areas.



Using Kodotchigova's 6 step approach, design and carry out a role play exercise with a group of students in your subject discipline. Write a reflective evaluation of the role play exercise and use it to inform your future practice.

Academic Critique:

Academic skills, which are relevant to the higher education context, such as reflecting, evaluating, developing arguments and forming judgments may be assessed for both formative and summative purposes through the method of 'critique'. This can involve asking students to critique a research paper, newspaper article, a government paper or a host of similar subject focused literature. When using 'critique' as a method of assessment students should be provided with a 'framework', which may be specific to a particular subject discipline and they should be well practiced in applying the framework prior to the assessment event. A possible 5 point framework for critiquing a research paper may be:

- What are the main theme and sub-themes of the article?

- What are the main claims and conclusions that the author is making?
- What evidence is presented by the author to support the claims and conclusions?
- Are the claims and conclusions plausible (i.e. believable)
- Are the claims and conclusions credible (i.e. from a trustworthy source)?

It should be acknowledged that there is probably no generic framework that suits all purposes and subject disciplines. Tutors should adopt a pragmatic approach in designing frameworks that are suited to their purpose and make the process of critiquing easier for students.

Learning Journal or Portfolio:

Building a learning journal or portfolio, either electronic or paper based, can be a productive exercise, which links well to modular programmes, offers a focus for students and also provides scope for reflective practice. A structured learning journal may comprise session by session lecture materials supported by relevant research papers or other relevant literature but should always include a reflective log. The reflective log should encourage students to build links between theory, practice and their own experience and should help individuals to

engage with the principles of 'deep' learning as defined by Biggs, J. (2003). For more information on [Portfolio's or Learning Journals](#) as a form of HE assessment follow this link.

Discussion Forum:

A discussion forum can be an excellent way of assessing student abilities in developing arguments on module specific issues, professional etiquette, use of subject specific language and reflective practice. The synchronous forum is an excellent assessment tool for both formative and summative purposes. When used for formative purposes, students may 'log-on' from anywhere that they have internet access, on one occasion, when I ran a synchronous forum during the last session prior to Christmas, I had students log-on from Jamaica, Cyprus and the Ivory Coast to take part, as they had already flown home for the Christmas break.

When used for summative purposes, it is necessary to book a computer suite and house all students in one room to take part in the discussion. Though this may be seen by some as defeating the object of working electronically at all, it in fact still offers many advantages over alternative ways of using discussion sessions for assessment. The main advantage is that tutors can print off a permanent

record of contributions and then assess each individual's input and involvement against a predefined set of criteria. This would then form the basis for grading and feedback to students. Additionally, the printed record of contributions can then be used to form the basis of a further discussion, where students are normally placed into small groups in order to analyse the contributions, pick out the principal points and engage with an element of peer assessment prior to closing the activity down.

The asynchronous forum, which may run for a set period is possibly a more common use of discussion boards for formative purposes. Discussion topics are normally set up by tutors and may run for a period of a week, during which, students log-on from time to time, read contributions that have been posted and respond accordingly. The asynchronous approach offers the same advantages as those outlined above in so far as the tutor may print out a record of the discussion and use it as a basis for further discussion, peer assessment and feedback during a later face-to-face session. Further information on [synchronous and asynchronous discussion sessions](#) as applied during an on-line course in journalism may be obtained by following this link.

Co-operative Learning Groups:

Co-operative learning strategies have become very popular in North America and are becoming widely used in UK universities. Normally, students are placed into groups of 4 for co-operative learning purposes with selection based on prior knowledge of the participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, learning style, age and a range of other factors that the tutor may consider to be significant. One of the main benefits of co-operative learning group strategies is that it is thought to be more realistic in terms of what happens in the workplace – normally, we can't choose our work colleagues and have to work co-operatively with those selected by others.

Co-operative learning groups should be self-managed with little or no involvement from tutors in the running of the group and participants should be made aware of the assessment arrangements at the outset of the activity to enable them to adopt a cohesive approach as they work towards the assessment. Assessment arrangements can vary from such things as a group presentation to a group research paper, whatever the adopted method, each member must contribute on an equal basis to the final outcome. Assessment may be at either or both of two levels – a group assessment in which every member is awarded the same grade regardless of their contribution or an individual grade for each group member, which is

much more difficult to achieve, based on the tutors perception of who has contributed what.

Other Methods of Assessment:

There are a multitude of methods for assessing students in higher education. Written assignments, presentations and written critiques still dominate on some courses, while traditional examinations still play a part on many 'core' modules. The table overleaf identifies many of the methods in use today and places them broadly into the eight categories suggested by Nightingale et al (1996):

Technique	Electronic	Traditional
Thinking Critically & Making judgments.		
Webquest	√	
Essay		√
Report	√	√
Journal	√	√
Letter of advice to....		√
Present a case.		√
Prepare a committee briefing paper.		√
Book review		√
Write a newspaper article.	√	√
Produce a report for a quality committee		√
Solving Problems & Developing Plans.		
Co-operative Groups		√
Webquest	√	
Work-based problem	√	√
Prepare a committee of enquiry report		√
Draft a research bid		√
Analyse a case		√
Prepare a conference paper		√

Performing Procedures & Demonstrating Techniques.		
Demonstrate a skill		✓
Role play (electronic or traditional)	✓	✓
Make a video	✓	
Produce a display		✓
Lab report		✓
Prepare a manual for using equipment		✓
Simulation of professional practice	✓	✓
Personal & Reflective development.		
Learning journal	✓	✓
Portfolio	✓	✓
Group work		✓
Reflective log	✓	✓
Reflective essay	✓	✓
e-portfolio log/diary	✓	
Presentation	✓	✓
Accessing & Managing Information.		
Project	✓	✓
Dissertation/Thesis		✓
Applied task	✓	✓
Webquest	✓	
Information literacy task	✓	✓

Demonstrating Knowledge & Understanding.		
Written examination		✓
Interview	✓	✓
Essay		✓
Report	✓	✓
Devise an encyclopedia entry		✓
Produce an A – Z of...		✓
Respond in writing to a clients enquiry		✓
Multiple choice test		✓
Block answer test		✓
Computer aided assessment	✓	
Role play (electronic or traditional)	✓	✓
On-line forum	✓	
Critique		✓
Designing, Creating and Performing.		
Portfolio	✓	✓
Presentation	✓	✓
Performance		✓
Exhibition	✓	✓
Communication Skills.		
Written presentation (i.e. essay, assignment etc.)		✓
Interview		✓
Presentation	✓	✓
Telephone		✓

consultation		
Discussion/debate	✓	✓
Role play	✓	✓
Video	✓	
Conference delivery		✓

NB: Some assessments that are shown as 'traditional' may require some electronic input (i.e. word processing an essay etc.).

Feedback:

Assessment and learning are irrevocably linked and any assessment technique that fails to exploit this connection and provide feedback to students, which enhances the process of teaching and learning is somewhat worthless in terms of its contribution to an individual's personal or academic development.

Even so, there are numerous different ways of providing feedback to students, some of which lend themselves more easily to certain contexts and situations than others and some of which may appeal more to learners with particular learning characteristics. The most common means of providing feedback to HE students continues to be in a 'written' format and this tends to be of varying structure and quality. Other forms of feedback include that provided verbally to individuals or groups, that provided by means of a tick sheet, which maps the

assessment criteria to the assessed work, that provided electronically, which may be written or may take a different form and the many types of oral feedback through interview, tutorial or other means, which often follows presentations or similar types of assessment. Access further guidance on producing effective feedback at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assessment>

Further reading:

Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university (2nd edition)*. Maidenhead. Open University Press.

Linn, R. L., & Gronlund, N. E. (2000). *Measurement and assessment in teaching (8th edition)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Nightingale, P., Te Wiata, I.T., Toohey, S., Ryan, G., Hughes, C., Magin, D. (1996) *Assessing learning in universities professional development centre*. University of New South Wales. Australia. (Unpublished material for Southern Cross University booklet 'Assessing Students').

Reece, I. & Walker, S. (2006) *Teaching, training and learning (6th edition)*. Sunderland. Business Education Publishers Ltd.

Appendix 1.

In many ways we have already moved some way towards the adoption of a range of University principles of assessment both through our regulations and guidance on the approval and validation of awards.

The adoption of such principles and policies is not however solely concerned with codification of existing consensus and practice. There is considerable evidence, for example, that students remain dissatisfied with the variation in both the quality and timing of formative feedback on their summative assessments. Yet without the timely opportunity to learn from assessment, we effectively fail to acknowledge that assessment is integral to a dynamic process of student learning. The economic circumstances of many learners encourage them to invest most effort in activities which yield the most tangible benefits. We let them down if we fail to secure the greatest possible learning from assessment.

**Source: ACADEMIC AWARD REGULATIONS –
Assessment Principles and Policy.**

Appendix 2.

Summative Assessment and Formative Feedback on Modules/Units of Study:

The study of all modules or units of study will include both summative assessment and formative feedback. Explicit criteria against which performance is to be assessed will be published in advance of all summative assessments. A summative assessment may also provide the necessary formative function if the student receives detailed written feedback no later than 5 weeks (excluding days on which the University is officially closed) after submission and at least 2 weeks prior to the deadline for any end of year/teaching block summative assessment. Such feedback must be given against the published performance criteria for the assessment.

Alternatively, students will receive purposeful and systematic feedback on their learning and progress through participation in other activities. Such feedback will be made available no later than 4 weeks (excluding days on which the University is officially closed) after the activity has taken place and at least 2 weeks prior to any end of year/teaching block summative assessments. It may be provided in a variety of oral, written and electronic formats to individuals or to groups of students.

Source: ACADEMIC AWARD REGULATIONS – Assessment Principles and Policy.

5. Teaching Models and Styles of Delivery

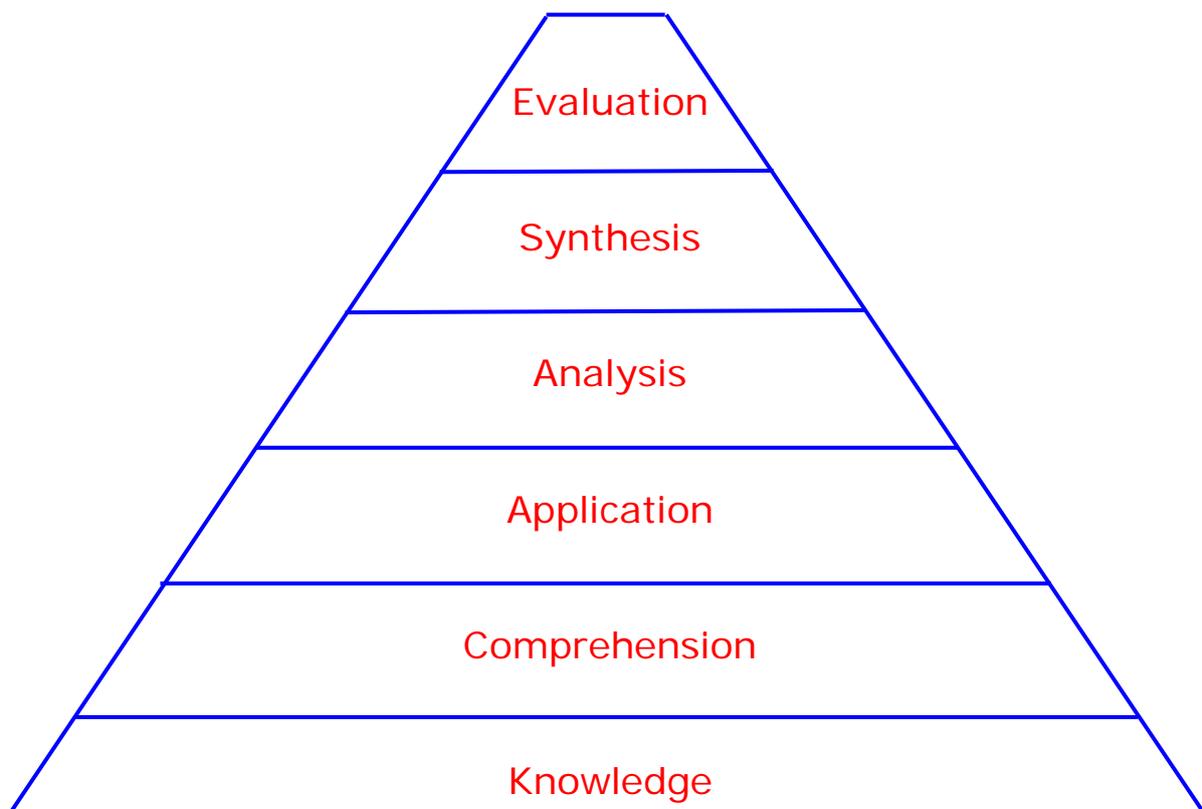
It is probable that most practitioners choose teaching models and styles of delivery that are aligned to their own personal strengths and preferences. Even so, there are many factors that should be considered when deciding on teaching and delivery methods including group size, student diversity and the type of material being taught. This section of the sample pack will examine a number of models and styles of delivery that are commonly used in the context of HE.

The Domain or Outcome Focused Model.

Most teaching in HE is focused on achieving objectives or learning outcomes, hence, when choosing a teaching or delivery model it seems appropriate to make the domain and level of objective or outcome a factor in that choice. Benjamin Bloom (1956) is widely credited with having identified the major learning domains, which are embedded in a model that is widely known as [‘Bloom’s Taxonomy’](#). It is not appropriate in this document to delve into the labyrinths’ of philosophical debate that surround Bloom’s classification, nonetheless, a basic understanding of the three domains is necessary if we are to use them as a basis for planning and facilitation. For this reason the three domains are briefly outlined on the pages that follow:

Cognitive Domain.

The cognitive domain is probably the most commonly used of the three and is fundamental to much work in HE. Bloom (1956) identified 6 levels in the cognitive domain, which he arranged as a pyramid structure with the lower-level cognitive skills at the bottom moving to the higher-level skills at the top. Bloom's pyramid is reproduced below for convenience:



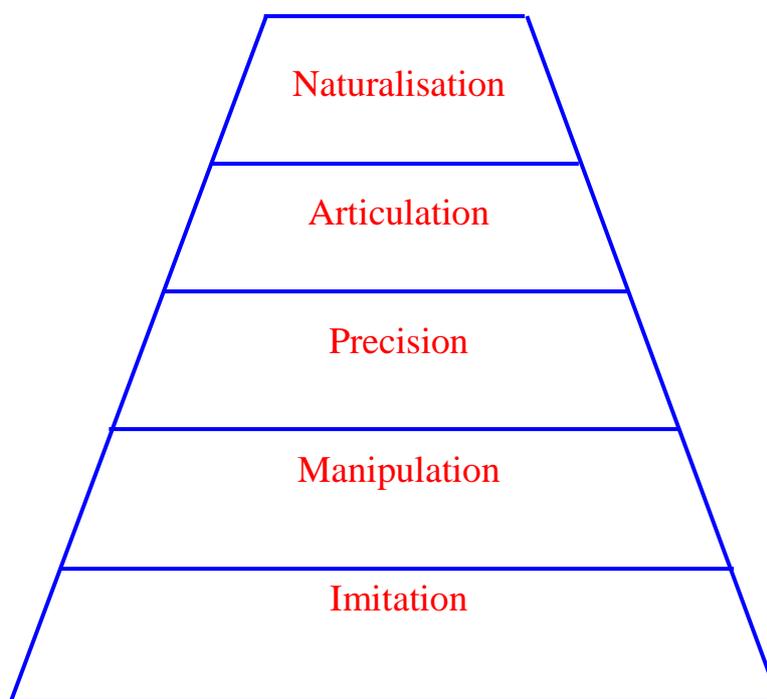
The level at which the planned learning appears in the pyramid structure, clearly has some bearing on the type of approach taken to delivery. For example, the lower level knowledge category may be delivered through a mass lecture approach. As we move up the pyramid, however, the mass lecture becomes less appropriate as comprehension, application and analysis would require a different line of attack, perhaps a research focused approach or a critique. It may be that we begin to ascend Bloom's pyramid during a single learning encounter; clearly, this scenario would necessitate a change in delivery method at critical points during the session. Perhaps we may begin with a lecture type approach, for example, before moving to a more student centred methodology as we move from the basic knowledge foundation to the more advanced levels. For [further information and an extensive list of web-links](#) on 'learning and the cognitive domain', please follow this link.



Look carefully at Bloom's cognitive pyramid. Think of examples of learning that you deliver and try to locate them on the pyramid. Consider how delivery methods differ as we move up the pyramid. For example, at what point do we move from teacher centred to learner centred approaches and what different qualities are brought to the learning experience.

Psychomotor Domain

The psychomotor domain is activated when physical movement, co-ordination and motor skills form the focus of the learning. Bloom and his colleagues did not actually develop levels for the psychomotor domain though several other theorists have, including Dave (1975) who developed the model overleaf. The pyramid structure shown illustrates the lower and higher level skills associated with this domain.



As with the cognitive pyramid, the lower level skills such as 'imitation' form the base of the structure. As we progress up the pyramid the skills required become

increasingly complex until we reach 'naturalisation' at the highest point. [Further information on the psychomotor levels](#) may be found by following this link. The psychomotor domain becomes significant when mastery of a skill is the key objective as in for example, in an art skill such as painting or throwing a pot, or a sport skill such as bowling a cricket ball or throwing a javelin. It is likely that the learning process will begin with observation and imitation as Dave (1975) describes. If mastery is to be achieved, the learner will move up through each level of the pyramid until the high-level skill performance becomes 'natural' and can be performed without thought.

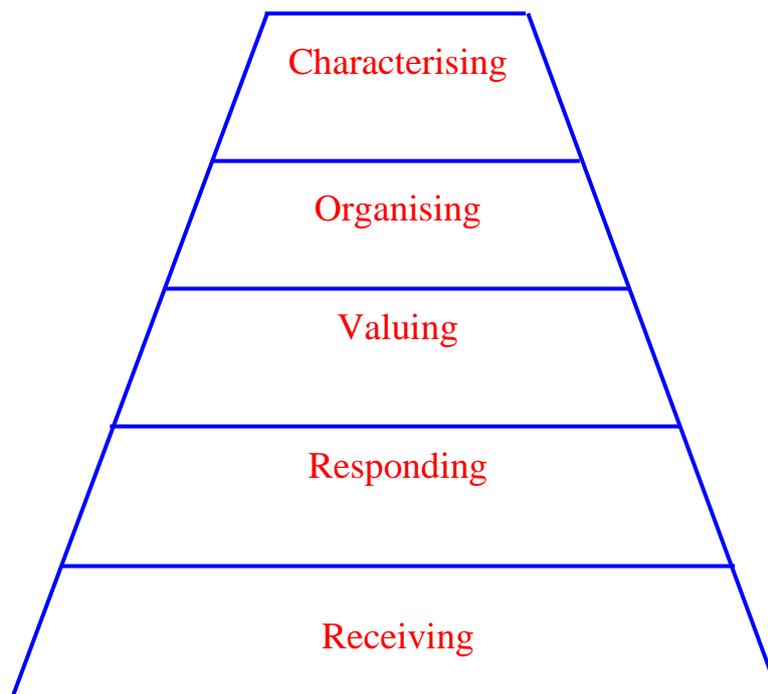


Consider whether you access the learner's psychomotor domain in the delivery of your subject discipline. If you do, formulate a session plan for teaching a psychomotor skill, which will take learners through each level of the pyramid. Try your session plan out in practice and evaluate the effectiveness of your approach.

The Affective Domain

The affective domain is concerned with feelings, attitudes, values and emotions. In HE the affective dimensions of learning are inherently significant even though they are not always emphasised through affective objectives being stated in module guides and other course literature.

Whenever an objective begins with 'to gain an appreciation of.....', 'to empathise with.....' or 'to reflect upon the values and emotions.....' etc. we are activating the affective domain of learning. As with the previous two dimensions, affective elements may be arranged in levels; however, unlike the cognitive and psychomotor level structures the affective dimensions involve more "internalising" of the feeling or attitude, rather than ascending in levels of complexity. The Figure below shows the levels in the affective pyramid as identified by Reece & Walker (2006):



The affective aspects of learning have often been neglected over the years particularly in subject areas such

as art, where appreciation has been taught rather than nurtured. Music likewise, students in the 1950s were taught that Elgar was a great composer and that his music was an example of excellence whether they liked it or not! Recently, there has been considerable interest in emotional intelligence and other aspects of the affective domain, particularly in the context of Higher Education. For [further information on the affective domain](#) please follow this link.



Consider the affective aspects of your own subject discipline. How do you address the affective learning outcomes within your own practice? Prepare a session plan, which includes affective learning outcomes. Deliver your planned session and evaluate the affective aspects of the session in respect of student learning.

Further Reading:

Bloom B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay Co Inc.

Dave, R. H. (1975). *Developing and Writing Behavioural Objectives*. (R J Armstrong, ed.) Educational Innovators Press.

The Behaviourist Approach to Teaching

The behaviourist school of thought has its roots in Greek philosophy but has grown in prominence since the work of [Pavlov](#), [Skinner](#), [Thorndike](#) and others who carried out much experiential work during the latter 19th and mid 20th century and laid the foundations for some well developed behaviourist theories that have persisted to the present day.

[The behaviourist approach to curriculum planning](#) has been dominant in all phases of education and continues to provide the framework for the majority of programmes in Higher Education. Aims and objectives form the basis of the behaviourist approach, which is seen by advocates as an efficient way of planning programmes that can then be broken down into a carefully sequenced set of structured sessions leading, eventually, to a pre-identified set of educational outcomes. The major characteristics of the behavioural model are its central concern with the 'products' of the educational process, its view of learning as a linear step-by-step process and its emphasis on bringing about certain behavioural changes in the learner. Such a scientific approach makes planning easier and provides a framework for assessing learners against the learning outcomes.

Despite the behavioural framework that provides the basis for much HE planning, lecturers retain a great deal of autonomy in the way they deliver sessions to students. Mass lectures, which have as a feature 'transmission' of knowledge still form an important part of the lecturers toolkit, but this behavioural, teacher centred approach to delivery is almost invariably combined with other more student centred approaches that provide a much more 'active' role for the learner. That is not to say that didactic approaches are to be avoided. Lecturing students represents a tried and tested method of disseminating knowledge or information to students and is often used at the outset of a session and as a way of summarising the main points at the end. It is commonly acknowledged, however, that instructive behavioural methods are limited and may lead to a 'surface' approach by learners. Follow the link for more information on the 'Behaviourist Approach' to teaching and learning.

The Cognitivist Approach to Teaching

[Jean Piaget](#) (1950) alerted us to the stages of intellectual development that a human being may encounter between birth and adulthood. Work in this area was taken forward by [Jerome Bruner](#) (1968) who developed a second model

with fewer stages and went on to propose some theories of instruction, which provided an insight into how cognitive approaches to learning may be promoted.

Bruner's model suggests three stages of development as opposed to Piaget's four-stage theory that was published some 18 years earlier. Bruner also implied that rather than 'passing through' each stage of intellectual development, leaving one stage behind as they entered the next, as Piaget had suggested, that each individual increased their armoury as they moved on, until eventually they could employ skills from any of the stages depending on the task in hand.

Regardless of the arguments and contrasting theories as to when the different stages occur and whether all individuals actually reach the more advanced stages, if we accept that there are stages at all, and on the same principle that adult thinking is qualitatively different from that of a child, then we also accept that the methods used to teach adults will be somewhat different from those used to teach children. On this basis the theory of teaching children (pedagogy), is recognised as being very different from that of teaching adults (andragogy). Each is based on the theories of cognitive development.

Both Piaget and Bruner agreed that 'active learning' was a fundamental aspect of 'cognitive development'. This is very different from the 'passive' approach often associated with behavioural methods and suggests a completely different role for the facilitator. The Russian theorist [Lev Vygotsky](#) did much work in this area and is well known for his work on the '[Zone of Proximal Development](#)' (ZPD). Vygotsky suggested that each individual could learn more with the help of an experienced facilitator. His theory focussed on the idea that learning should be an active experience with the learner taking the initiative. If the learner reached a point where they could go no further the facilitator could 'step-in' and provide just enough information to enable the learner to continue and again take the initiative. The gap between what the learner could achieve on their own and what they could achieve with the help of an experienced facilitator was what Vygotsky described as the ZPD. This theory has become the basis for much modern day teaching in all phases of education. Follow the link for more information on Vygotsky and his work.

The Humanist Approach to Teaching

The "Humanist" movement began as a reaction to behaviourist techniques and became famous in 1960 when

A.S. Neill published his work entitled 'Summerhill'. Neill's book documented a radical approach to education in a fee paying school in the south of England. Pupils at the school were not forced to go to lessons but attended when they wanted too. School decisions were taken on a committee basis where every pupil and each member of staff had one vote. There was no conventional curriculum and learning activities were negotiated on the same basis. In academic terms the school failed badly and examination results were poor. The school eventually closed following pressure from the LEA and the only known example of humanist education in Great Britain was lost.

Humanism is largely based on the beliefs that human beings are intrinsic 'goal setters' and learning is an instinctive process fuelled by self motivation and desire. Humanist principles are difficult to apply in the context of Higher Education due to the behaviourist framework that provides aims, objectives and outcomes for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Even so, there is some scope for humanist approaches for students engaging with research degrees at masters and doctoral level. In this context, though there are criteria that each candidate must address, there is far more room for negotiation and much independence is afforded to the learner.

With all the behavioural constraints placed on facilitators in Higher Education, it may be difficult to imagine how humanist principles may be employed at any level. Nonetheless, there are approaches that staff may take at

both faculty and classroom level. At faculty level, open classrooms, regular class meetings and remaining open minded about alternative forms of assessment are fundamental to humanist thinking and practice. At class level students must be allowed to exercise both choice and control over curriculum content and delivery. All activities may be self-evaluated and self-monitored with co-operative learning groups playing a key role in student learning.

In essence, humanism seeks to develop self esteem and self belief in the learner providing both the motivation and desire to set and achieve realistic academic goals. This intrinsic desire for learning replaces the behaviourist belief in extrinsic incentives and rewards. The emphasis for the humanist teacher, therefore, is on active and social learning. The humanist teacher is a facilitator, not a transmitter, of knowledge. Participatory and discovery methods are favoured ahead of traditional authoritarianism and passive learning. Follow this link for

further information on [Humanism and the implications for teaching and learning](#).



Plan a session that includes behaviourist, cognitive and humanist approaches to learning. For example, you may begin with a didactic approach before moving to a more learner centred activity. You may then negotiate over the direction to take during a later part of the session before finishing with a summary and introduction to the following weeks work. Deliver your session and evaluate positive and negative aspects.

Constructivist Approaches to Teaching

The [constructivist approach](#) has its roots in cognitive psychology and grew largely from Piaget's theory of intellectual development. Constructivists believe that the prior knowledge of learners is critical in constructing new meaning and understanding and this may involve constant re-conceptualisation and cognitive positioning as new knowledge is added to existing structures. Fundamental to the constructivist approach is the concept of 'active learning' advocated by Piaget. Learning to constructivists is an active individual pursuit based on the notion of [accommodation and assimilation](#). It is a 'learner centred' approach, which assumes that all learning is processed through the conceptual framework of the learner who must accommodate and assimilate new ideas into existing structures. Problem solving approaches are a key element in constructivist teaching and [Kolb's experiential learning cycle](#) is an example of how Constructivist philosophy has been developed into a practice based model, which has been widely used in Higher Education. The cycle also provides a bridge to other theories of learning such as [Kurt Lewin's](#) cycle and [Honey and Mumford's learning styles](#).

Social Constructivist Approaches to Teaching.

Though there are many similarities between the theories of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky they differed over the importance of language and social interaction and its impact on the process of teaching and learning. Piaget (constructivist) placed less importance on the role of language, emphasising the active nature of learning as the most important element. Bruner and Vygotsky, however, who we recognise as 'social constructivists', though sharing Piaget's view on the importance of active learning placed far more emphasis on language and social interaction, leading to a different role for the [social constructivist teacher](#) as opposed to that of the constructivist. To the social constructivist, meaning and understanding grow out of social engagement with language playing a major role in the process.

With this in mind, it becomes possible to understand the strong links between Vygotsky's theory of the ZPD and social constructivist practices in the classroom. In Higher Education, social constructivism provides a common approach to facilitation. [Co-operative learning groups](#) are a prime example where students interact socially and communicate through language in pursuit of their learning goals. The facilitator in this context largely exists as a 'consultant' and may offer sporadic advice during the

learning process before allowing the group to take the initiative.

In essence, constructivist and social constructivist devotee's share many principles. The underpinning emphasis on 'active learning' and the shared belief in re-conceptualisation, accommodation and assimilation transcend the philosophical boundaries between the two schools as does the learner centred, problem solving nature of the contrasting models. The fundamental difference between the two approaches is the increased emphasis on language, social interaction and collaborative learning offered by the social constructivist approach. The learner's [zone of proximal development](#) is an important concept in applying social constructivist methods in the classroom.



Reflect on your own experience as a learner. Try to identify constructivist and social constructivist experiences that you have encountered. Which did you prefer? Do you like working as an individual on problem solving tasks or do you prefer group situations based on the principles of co-operative learning? What are the implications of the two approaches for different types of learner?

Further Reading

Hartley, P., Woods, A., Pill, M., (2005) *Enhancing teaching in higher education*. Abingdon. Routledge.

Knight, P.T. (2002) *Being a teacher in higher education*. Buckingham. Open University Press.

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Reece, I. & Walker, S. (2006) *Teaching, training and learning (6th edition)*. Sunderland. Business Education Publishers Ltd.

Schofield, M. (2005) '*Constructivist Principles*' and '*Conditions for Learning*'. *Scaffolding Curriculum Design*. Educational Developments, 4.4. , SEDA, UK.

Tapp, R.B. (1997) *Humanists and education*. Humanism today. Vol.11. North American Committee for Humanism.
<http://www.humanismtoday.org/vol11/>

Evaluating Teaching & Learning.

What does 'Evaluating Teaching & Learning' Mean?

Evaluation is different to assessment and it is important that we recognise the fundamental differences between the two terms. The term assessment refers to the *systematic gathering of information* about component parts of the learning that is to be evaluated. The evaluation process is broader than assessment and involves *examining information* about the components of the learning and *making judgments* about the success or failure of the learning, which may or may not have taken place.

From the perspective of staff working in higher education the evaluation of learning has many strands. The ways we assess students and the *judgments* we make as a result of the assessment exercise is one way that we ascertain whether learning outcomes have been met and whether the learning experience has been successful for individual students. Evaluating learning goes much further than this, however, we need to collect feedback from students on different aspects of the learning experience and use the data collected to inform future practice as we strive for a

culture of continuous improvement in all aspects of our professional work.

Computer analysed modular feedback sheets, which have become affectionately known as 'happy sheets' by higher education practitioners offer some data to help us in the evaluation process. Even so, this rather limited data set is nowhere near enough if we are serious about improving the learning experience for students and enhancing our own academic practice. Included below are some suggestions that HE staff may embed in their practice and which may supplement existing data streams in our quest for continuous improvement.

Student Focus Groups.

Focus groups are an excellent way of collecting data from students about a learning experience. Even so, focus group members need to be carefully selected as throwing the offer open normally results in a group comprised of the more enthusiastic students and may present a false picture. [Setting up and running focus groups](#) is a relatively undemanding task and though theorists suggest that 8 – 10 members is the norm, there are many examples of successful focus group sessions involving 30 students or

more, making it quite feasible to run a focus group session with a 'normal' sized teaching or seminar class.



Follow the link above and use the advice provided to set up and run a student focus group. You may take the opportunity to gather evaluation data about one of your sessions or the focus may be a sequence of three or four sessions. If you feel it is too early to collect evaluation data, simply set up a focus group to discuss a relevant issue. Reflect on the process and plan for future focus group activities.

Peer Observation of Teaching.

Staffordshire University operates a mandatory process of 'peer observation', which is aimed at improving teaching practice across the institution and at the same time enhancing the learning experience for students. Peer observation may be considered as part of the evaluation of learning process, providing developmental opportunities for staff and allowing for the identification and dissemination of good practice both within and across faculties.

Principles:

The process of Peer Observation endorsed by the University is underpinned by the following principles:

- It is designed to be developmental and encourage reflection
- It is independent of other performance related issues and, as a consequence, is not linked to discipline, probation or promotion
- It is undertaken by peers as part of a supportive, constructive and non-threatening process

Intended Outcomes:

By implementing a Peer Observation process within the University it is intended that the following outcomes can be met:

- Promotion of a culture in which good teaching is recognised, valued and celebrated
- Enhancement in the quality of student learning by providing an effective framework for staff to review, document and reflect upon their teaching
- Facilitation of the identification and dissemination of good practice in teaching across the University

- Encouragement and support for the Continuous Professional Development of staff involved with teaching and learning

It should be acknowledged that models of teaching and successful practice may differ across faculties – what works well in Art & Design, for example, may not be a successful model in the Faculty of Law. Even so, there is much good practice that may be disseminated across faculties and mechanisms for achieving this should be an integral part of the Peer Observation process. It is generally agreed that there are three parts to the Peer Observation process, the pre-observation phase, the observation phase and the feedback phase. Each phase with associated guidelines is briefly outlined below:

Pre-Observation Phase:

A pre-observation discussion between the observer(s) and the observee is essential to the success of the process. If this is not possible 'face-to-face', then a telephone conversation or e-mail dialogue may be appropriate. The main aims of the pre-observation discussion should be to:

1. Establish trust
2. Deal with any fears or anxieties
3. Give reassurance

The following issues should be considered for inclusion in the discussion:

- Agreement on the session to be observed and details of venue.
- Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the observers.
- Agreement on the process of observation, confidentiality of information and date for post observation feedback.
- Clarification of the intended learning outcomes of the session to be observed.
- Contextualisation of session to be observed and any relevant issues to be noted. (The observee should be prepared to outline the intended plan for the session to be observed and to justify how this fits in with the rest of the module. Access to a session plan and/or module outline may help to inform this process)
- Clarification of any particular issue affecting student learning within the session (e.g. any reasonable adjustments being made for students with disabilities).
- Agreement and awareness raising of documentation to be completed.
- Clarification of any Faculty agreed issue / additional focus for the observation process (e.g. if student retention is a focal point, the observee should be able to justify what strategies they use).

- Request by the observee of any particular issue on which they may welcome additional feedback.
- Agreement on the way in which the students will be informed about the process.
- Sharing of any additional concern from either the observee or the observer(s).

The Observation Phase:

Observer(s) may wish to consider the following when undertaking an observation:

- Arrive approximately 10-15 minutes before the start of the session.
- Agree with the observee where to sit. Care should be taken so that they are not in the observee's or the students' line of vision. However they should also ensure that they are able to see both the observee and the students' faces.
- Endeavour to be unobtrusive and 'blend into the background' in order not to disrupt the learning process. However as a matter of courtesy it is advisable for the observee to inform the students about the peer observation process by adhering to the following procedure:

Explain to the students that a series of peer observations is taking place in the University as part of quality enhancement and that this observation is part of that process.

Briefly introduce the observer(s)

Clarify to the students that the observer(s) do not take part in the session

Ask the students to proceed as normal

- Remember that the objective is to *observe* and *evaluate* the learning and teaching and should therefore not join in (e.g. discussions), although they should take any handouts, which are circulated.
- Be aware of their non-verbal communication signals e.g. should avoid shaking their heads in despair or raising their eyebrows.
- Keep focused on the extent to which the students are learning. Key prompts for this are listed on pages 10-11.
- Make appropriate notes within the session. These should focus on aspects, which they consider to be the key strengths and areas for development.
- Aim to stay until the end of the session as leaving early would:
 - a) Be disruptive for the students and the observee.
 - b) Prevent evaluation of an essential part of the learning process.

The Feedback Phase:

The feedback phase is a vital aspect of the peer observation process and is an essential element in

encouraging staff to become more reflective with regard to their practice. The following guidelines are provided to support staff in the process of giving and receiving feedback:

- Feedback should be given in private – i.e. not in front of the students or other staff.
- The views of the observee are very important. The observer(s) should endeavour to discuss the session and listen to the observee's opinions.
- All feedback should be **constructive, and supportive**, not destructive and demoralising. For feedback to be useful and constructive, it must not be confused with judgment. In view of this, the feedback session must be structured in terms of its content and handling. If at any point the feedback appears to be judgmental or highly critical, the observee may become defensive.
- The focus of the feedback should be on the effectiveness of the student learning process.
- Aim to differentiate between aspects of standard practice and obvious strengths.
- The feedback should be specific to the observation criteria and should focus on behaviour rather than the person.
- A balance needs to be achieved between positive and negative feedback.
- Be unambiguous about specific areas for development

- Give praise where it is deserved.
- Positive feedback on its own does not guarantee improvement.
- For feedback to be effective, the observer should consider the amount of information that the observee can make use of rather than the amount they are capable of giving.

When being debriefed the observee should endeavour to:

- Give a rationale for their actions but should not be defensive in the face of constructive criticism.
- Listen carefully and critically.
- Check for understanding.
- Remain positive about their personal development.
- Engage with realistic action planning.

Feedback Structure:

Feedback can be given in different ways dependent upon the circumstances and the preferences of the staff involved. Three distinct possibilities are identified below. Ideally the observer(s) should explain to the observee what structure for the giving of feedback they intend to use and seek the observee's agreement.

Structure 1:

Ask the observee how well they thought the session had gone; use open questions and prompts to encourage further analysis.

Present own analysis of the strengths and areas for development. Summarise what worked particularly well and could be extended, and what aspects need further development.

Agree on actions to be taken, with specific dates for these to be completed.

Structure 2:

Begin by presenting a summary of the strengths and areas for development, using specific examples from the session to illustrate points.

Invite the observee to add any observations of their own and comment on your evaluation.

Summarise what worked particularly well and could be built upon and what aspects need further development.

Agree on actions to be taken, with specific dates for these to be completed.

Structure 3:

Begin by going through the session chronologically, describing the effectiveness or otherwise of various stages and activities.

Encourage the observee to contribute their views and ideas.

Summarise what worked particularly well and could be built upon and what aspects need further development.

Agree on actions to be taken, with specific dates for these to be completed

Much has been written about Peer Observation of Teaching and most practitioners now agree that used in a developmental way it is a technique, which has much to offer with regards to sharing and disseminating best practice and engendering a culture of continuous improvement in higher education institutions. The Higher Education Academy offers further advice on this important process and provides an extensive [Peer Observation of Teaching Resource Database](#) for use by stakeholders.



Get together with a colleague and arrange to both observe and be observed during a formal teaching and learning session. Reflect on the experience of the two contrasting roles and discuss your thoughts with your colleague. Action plan for the future.

Self Reflection.

Reflective practice is now firmly embedded in the ethos of higher education, providing a means for individual practitioners to engage in self evaluation as we strive for an overarching culture of continuous improvement.

Reflective practice may be defined in several ways; a simple definition describes it as:

"The practice of engaging in reflection to identify important elements of past events"

www.teach-nology.com/glossary/terms/r/

accessed 2nd November 2006.

For higher education practitioners, however, reflective practice probably constitutes much more than this. As Biggs points out:

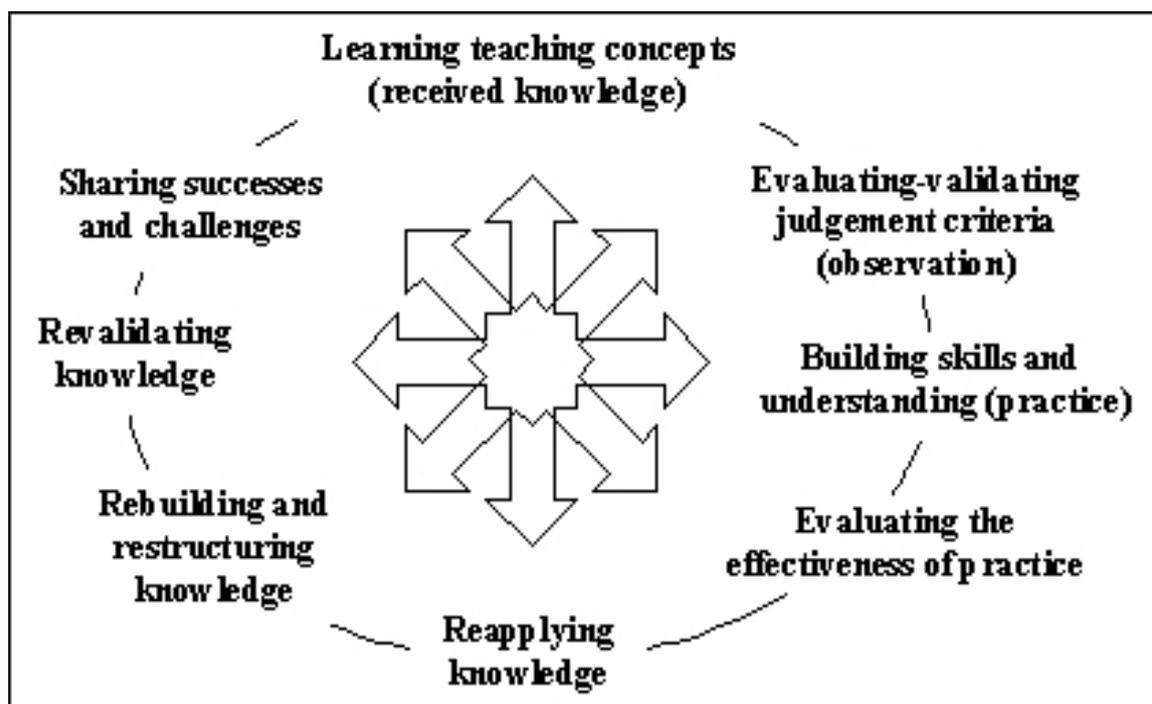
"'Reflection' is a misleading word. When you stand in front of a mirror what you see is your reflection, what you *are*. 'Reflection' as we are using it here, is rather like the mirror in *Snow White*: it tells you what you *might be*. This mirror uses theory to enable the transformation from the unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what might-be".

(Biggs, J. 2003

page 7).

The Biggs' definition reminds us of the evaluative quality of reflective activity and alerts us once more to the links between theory and practice. Moving from the 'unsatisfactory what-is' to the 'more effective what might-be' requires action planning supported by research and theoretical underpinning if it is to lead to an improved experience for students.

Biggs expands his views on reflective teaching and practice, making links to the [action research](#) movement and developing it into a 'reflective process' for teachers and lecturers, which has as a feature the same cyclical flavour as that associated with action based enquiry. The links between reflective practice and action research have been noted by a number of theorists and Victor McNair from the University of Ulster came up with a similar model, which also displays many similarities. This is reproduced below for the purpose of convenience.



McNair, V. (University of Ulster)

McNairs' model acknowledges the value of 'received knowledge' in the reflective process as it is considered

that for teachers and lecturers to be able to successfully reflect on their practice and action plan for change and improvement, knowledge of theoretical concepts relating to teaching and learning are essential in underpinning that process.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has much to say about reflective practice and offers a wealth of resources for practitioners, which are designed to both develop reflective skills on a personal level and introduce reflectivity into teaching and learning. To access the [HEA resources on reflective practice](#) follow this link.



Start to build up a reflective journal based on the evaluation of your own professional practice. Log ‘critical incidents’ and outline how you reacted to them. What might you do differently if a similar incident was to occur? Record possible action points for the future.

Further reading.

Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university (2nd edition)*. Maidenhead. Open University Press.

