**DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER**

# VCDTA 2012

# "TOP TIPS"

Collated and published by
Academic Professional Development,
People and Organisational Development Directorate

The following "Top Tips" have kindly been written by the 2012 winners of the Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award. This is a highly competitive student nominated award for up to 12 staff per year.

The ideas have been organised under the following headings:

▸ Engaging with and focussing on the student
▸ Supporting student learning and setting limits and expectations
▸ Enthusiasm for your subject

▸ Organisation
▸ Assessment and feedback
▸ Using specific teaching methods
▸ Using technology to enhance learning

## Engaging with and focussing on the student

- The key to successful teaching is to engage the student – be real, be normal, be funny, be interesting but above all, know your stuff. (JD)

- In the first few lectures, lab sessions or tutorials remember to tell the students who you are. (ZA)

- For me the key is energy and enthusiasm, if the students don't see me as being enthused about the topic the students don't have much chance! (AD)

- Although I'm the so-called 'expert' I try to start from the point that in order for them to learn and benefit, the students need to engage with the contact hours (class or otherwise) in a meaningful way. That means I need to understand what they want and need from the module that fits with my own ideas of what they want or need. This comes from listening, not being afraid to ask for feedback throughout the module and changing tack if needed if students don't get whatever it is you are trying to teach them. (SM)

- Most of the skills I am trying to embed are transferable so if the topic you're teaching is a tricky one, then try getting them to think about it using the experience they already have.

# Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award winners' "Top Tips"
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There's little point in talking about the complexity of delivering health care services, for example, if they've never worked in them – but they might have worked somewhere and many of the underlying principles can be transferred from context to context. I always try to see learning from the students' point of view – to sit in their shoes and see what the class/topic/lecturer looks like and whether that works for them. (SM)

- Treat your students as equals – we are here to facilitate their learning, not dictate to them. Often we can learn just as much from our students as they do from us. (JD)

- Learn the student's names. (ZA)

- Availability face to face is key: Email exchanges can get 'lost in translation' and most issues that students are struggling with can be sorted out much more quickly face to face. (SM)

- I've set up an extra-curricular club offering students opportunities beyond their studies. I've found that many of the students like to attend so that they can chat to me, explore other elements of their topic beyond the module learning requirements, ask me about different modules, talk about their ideas, and ask general University questions. (ZA)

- Try to be approachable. Say 'hi' to them when you see them on campus. (ZA)

- Wish the students a happy holidays and good luck with their exams. It only takes one quick colourful slide at the end of the lecture, but the students go away happy and like the fact that I've remembered that the holidays aren't just time for doing coursework or revision. (ZA)

- Above all, have fun with the students. Chat with them, share ideas with them and above all, show that you like what you do! (JD)

## Supporting student learning and setting limits and expectations

- Let the students know that they can contact you and how quickly you are likely to respond. This also helps to manage student expectations. (ZA)

- When supervising projects, be very clear about when supervision sessions are happening so that the students know when they can come to see you, but also let them know that they can email you at any time and you will do your best to respond (I say within 2 working days). Making these things clear helps to manage the student's expectation of the student-supervisor relationship. (ZA)

- Respond promptly to questions and queries. I explain to students that they should expect a response to an email within 2 working days, as I have other commitments or may need to consult with colleagues before replying. This ensures that the students know not to expect an immediate response, but know that it is worth emailing as I will get back to them as swiftly as possible. (ZA)

- We can't always be available to support student learning, so taking time to explain the variety of 'self-help' that is available, i.e. your Blackboard site, library databases, is really useful. I learned last year that students often need you to signpost them to things they were told at the start of first year but have long since forgotten! (SM)

- I try to find a balance between offering support but also being aware of when to let the student have a go on their own. If they know I'll support them they will ask when help is needed. (ZA)

- If a student confides in you or you can sense they are a having a tough time offer to meet them over coffee, sometimes the thought of meeting outside of the classroom environment helps. (ZA)
- Be prepared to go for a coffee with a student. When I'm talking to students who are down or having a bad time I've often offered to meet them for tea or coffee, this small gesture always raises a smile. Students seem to appreciate the thought that you would spend time to sit and listen, and discuss possible options and solutions. (ZA)

## Enthusiasm for your subject

- Students know immediately if you want to be there and if you're not enthusiastic about being there, then why should they be? Create energy in the room by getting them involved actively – talking to each other, working with different classmates. Humour works well and you can get away with trying it if the students know you love your subject and are trying to make them enthused about learning (SM)

- Throw in the odd joke, off-the-cuff comment or a statement about last night's TV programme and how that relates to the topic you are explaining. The students seem to like it when I come across as 'human', yes I really do watch (some of) the same TV that they do. This link between things that are current and what could otherwise be a bit of a dry topic sparks their enthusiasm too. (ZA)

## Organisation

- Be "on the ball". (JD)

- You can grab your students the very first week by simply being on time, organised and have detailed information regarding the module. A student one year was most surprised, and impressed, simply with me giving them a printed module handbook. (JD)

- Communicate information to the student body – for example, if one particular student asks me a question, the answer of which would be relevant to all, I e-mail the response to all immediately. (JD)

## Assessment and feedback

- Before setting your assessments plan when you are going to mark it, I block out time in my online calendar so that I can ensure that the marking gets done and feedback is distributed swiftly. This also ensures that I meet the four week feedback deadline. (ZA)

- When setting assessments I tell the students when they can hope to have feedback by (I usually give the last date of the 4 week DMU feedback guidance) and say that if possible we aim to have feedback to students sooner. This guidance has greatly reduced the number of students asking when they will get their feedback and marks. (ZA)

- Take the time to provide the student with detailed feedback, even if it takes a long time to do. I like my students to know that I have looked at their work in great detail; make sure that this is turned around promptly too (ideally within two weeks). (JD)

- Not all students act on the feedback they receive, but they still want it and do roughly know where they've filed it for next time! It needs to cover the process/structure of how to write an essay/deliver a PowerPoint presentation, but also the content – so I try to be as specific as possible about what more they can do. Last year, I got one of my groups to mark some exemplars and that opened their eyes to what markers are looking for in assessment and how to use that when writing an assignment. (SM)



**VCDTA winners** in 2012 were chosen from 795 student nominations across all faculties and directorates. The final 21 nominees were judged by a university panel chaired by Prof. Andy Downton, the PVC Learning and Teaching, and the maximum 12 awards were made.

> (This VCDTA winner is) "one of the most influential people in my life at university! Just a talk from (them) will skyrocket your motivation and give you confidence to make the most of your skills and embrace trying new things."
>
> **extract from student nomination, 2012**

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## Assessment and feedback (continued)

- When discussing feedback in lectures I always use the same logo (it looks like two people with a feedback loop arrow – courtesy of Microsoft ClipArt), hoping that this repetition of the logo reminds the students about when we are talking about feedback and the many forms it takes. (ZA)

- If I ask the students to complete a lab task I will sometimes provide a feedback sheet and on this include a reminder of the times when the students have previously received feedback.  This can be a few quick sentences, but hopefully it acts as a reminder that they are receiving informal feedback in the lab sessions through discussions with tutors, and that feedback is not just a sheet with marks on. (ZA)

## Using specific teaching methods

- **Lecturing** – is a performance art that requires preparation. I think a clear structure and narrative helps. I treat each lecture as a 'play' with different 'acts' and try to create a compelling story that what we're all doing over the two or three hours of class is significant, important and relevant to the students. It helps, I think, that I can relate to my NHS experience so that theory jumps off the page and into practice. (SM)

- If you're in a lecture trying to give an example make it a humorous one.  You'll be amazed at how many of the students remember what you said -some even give similar examples in exam answers! (ZA)

- Add an opportunities and careers slide to the end of each lecture.  Then each week update it with the latest job opportunities, work experience or opportunities such as Frontrunners here on campus.   The students seem to appreciate being pointed in the direction of places to start looking for opportunities and work. (ZA)

- **Seminars –** I use Blackboard to flag up advance work and organise it all in the same folder as the lecture notes so it's a one-stop shop for students downloading materials before the class. (SM)

- **Problem-based Learning –** use real-life scenarios and give students plenty of allocated class time to work on exploratory and enquiry-based learning. (SM)

- **Labs and workshops –** students tend to 'free ride' if they sit in the same groups each week, knowing that "so-and-so will do the work and I can then just turn up" – so I use a pack of cards and randomly assign them to workshop groups when they come into class. Despite early opposition to the fact I had separated them from their mates, it soon became clear that everyone was reading more in advance and contributions were more spread out because they never knew who they were going to be working with. (SM)

## Using technology to enhance learning

- Blackboard can sometimes look a bit dull, so I jazz it up with lots of coloured text and change the background etc.  I tend to colour co-ordinate so anything about coursework element 1 is red, coursework element 2 is green and exam information is blue (for example).  This makes it very easy to see at a glance what relates to what. (ZA)

- This year the test facility in Blackboard has dramatically reduced the amount of paper-based marking in my final year module.  It takes a little while to set up a test in Blackboard, but once it's done you can use it as many times as you wish, add questions, give it a password, set time limits, and one of the best things is that it marks and provides instant feedback, so that the students can very easily gauge their progress and where there is room for improvement. (ZA)

- Embrace new ways of doing things – fill Blackboard with useful information. Its on-line phase test facility went down particular well with my students this year as it can provide the student with INSTANT feedback. (SM)

(This VCDTA winner) "has made the teaching enjoyable and challenging for me whilst keeping the explanations and solutions clear and simple. […] His use of actual examples ensures that I am able to apply the theory to a real life situation."

**extract from student nomination, 2012**
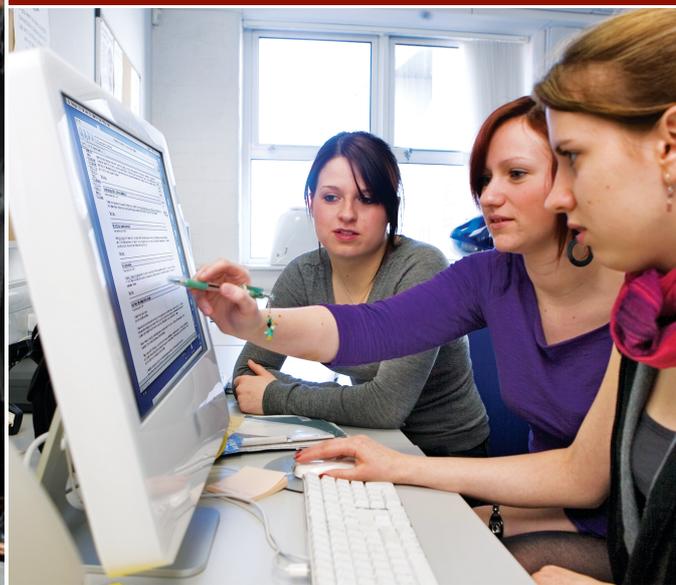
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