



Captivating your Class

EFFECTIVE TEACHING SKILLS

Joanne Philpott



Captivating Your Class

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Effective Teaching Skills

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Introduction

This book is based on classroom practice and is designed as a practical resource for teachers of Advanced Level teaching and learning. I began teaching 'A' Level when I was a newly qualified teacher and remember the anxiety induced from planning those lessons. 'A' Level teaching seemed to bear no relation to my 11–16 teaching. I had been given no specialist training just one session during my Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course and a few lessons on teaching practice. The department I worked in seemed to view sixth form as a separate entity almost as if this were the 'icing on the cake' or the 'golden child' of teaching and you could simply walk into the classroom and teach. It was simply expected that I could teach sixth form because I had teaching qualification and a degree in the subject I was teaching.

When I became a subject leader I wanted to change this view and make sixth form teaching a part of a bigger 11–19 experience. I wanted teachers and students to gain a sense of progression in their learning, as they moved from Key Stage 3 to General Certificate Secondary Education (GCSE) and onto 'A' Level. My aim was for the students and teachers to make connections across their subject experience and not compartmentalize their studies into boxes determined by examination. I also felt that teachers deserved opportunities for professional development in 'A' Level teaching beyond that of subject-content based conferences and examination board training.

As an advanced skills teacher I resolved to make 'A' Level teaching and learning a focus area and began expanding my post-16 teaching repertoire and developing strategies to help student learning in and out of their lessons. I made use of learning strategies from 11–16 classrooms and talked directly to students about their lessons and their preferred approaches to learning. Their responses were fascinating and demonstrated their desire to take greater ownership of the way they learn. Many students felt that they were told what to do, how to

work and even what to think and never really engaged with their subject and the learning process.

Since delivering In Service Training (INSET) on post-16 teaching and learning I have worked with many 'A' Level teachers who are proud of their creativity in 11–16 classrooms yet are aware they revert to didactic and teacher led lesson structures and delivery in their 'A' Level classrooms. They want to change but often are unsure of how to. More commonly they dare not change for fear results will suffer if they do not ensure they have provided all the relevant knowledge for their students. To reassure teachers over this anxiety I emphasize that the results of my students have consistently improved since moving to the approaches outlined in this book.

In the period since Curriculum 2000 was introduced the spate of government-driven initiatives have left many teachers dealing with what appear to be competing agendas. Due to examination changes and the introduction of key skills, post-16 education has in some instances been largely left untouched by education programmes such as the National Strategy, thinking skills, learning to learn, assessment for learning and others. Yet this book will argue that in all instances post-16 students will benefit from the effective use of the aforementioned strategies and more importantly to the benefit not the detriment of subject knowledge and content.

The aim of the book is two fold. First, it offers practical approaches to teaching in an 'A' Level classroom, this includes AS, A2 and all level 3 equivalents as well as the International Baccalaureate and other post-16 qualifications. The book is primarily designed to give confidence to teachers to teach in a way that encourages students to enjoy learning in their 'A' Level lessons in a purposeful way. In all instances the book refers to teaching in a 'classroom'; however I am aware that a classroom for many teachers is a studio, a playing field or another area that does not meet the traditional definition of a classroom. My definition encompasses all these learning spaces and refers to the physical space in which you teach.

Secondly, it will build on theoretical work where appropriate to help reflection and planning by individual teachers for their specific subjects and classes. 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory,' [Kurt Lewin (1952)] and it is necessary to explore the theoretical base of some of the ideas presented in the book. The references section will guide you to further reading for each of the chapters if you wish to explore the theory in greater depth. The book is in six chapters, each with a different focus and is applicable to all teachers

of post-16 students. There is no need to start at the beginning but turn to the chapter that interests you the most first and work on techniques suggested. Gradually work through the chapters and experiment with strategies that interest you and develop them in a manner that supports your subject and your students. There is overlap across all the chapters and ideas mentioned in one chapter may be developed in another.

The key messages of the book are two-fold. Personalized planning of lessons is essential, generic lesson plans will not work at 'A' Level and you will need to be aware of the personalities and individual strengths and weaknesses of the students in your class to be able to structure and develop their learning accordingly. Secondly the strategies will be successful when they have been developed in relation to your subject and consolidated to secure subject knowledge and understanding. To this end many suggestions are exemplified through a range of subject examples for both AS and A2.

I would like to formally acknowledge all the teachers and professionals who have helped my teaching to develop and the many 'A' Level students who have shared the classroom with me.

Joanne Philpott 2008

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1

Enlivening 'A' Level teaching and learning

Children who have are having a good time learn much better than those who are miserable.

Sue Palmer, Times Educational Supplement 2002

An 'A' Level classroom is an exciting place to be; no two experiences within it will ever be the same and the students within it will bring out the best in you and occasionally the worst. Students of 'A' Level are different compared to their younger counterparts as they have actively chosen to be in your subject classroom, playing field, laboratory or studio. They spent time making decisions with their family and friends about taking a course of 'A' Levels or level 3 equivalents and then deliberated over which subjects to take. For many this decision will not have been taken lightly. The success of their examinations will determine their immediate future and to some extent the rest of their lives, therefore, they deserve the best learning opportunities available to them. They are eager to learn more but they will also need to learn how to study your subject.

In many ways an 'A' Level classroom is a unique classroom in regard to the nature of the learning that takes place there. Due to examination pressures, 'A' Level classrooms are often knowledge driven with lesson objectives based around syllabus content and understanding of the subject information. Teachers are very aware that the students' understanding will be examined through externally marked AS and A2 papers and this can place a pressure on teachers to emphasize syllabus content through their lesson planning rather than the means by which the knowledge can be learned or conveyed. In other words the content drives the teaching and the pedagogy takes a back seat. Many classroom practitioners excel at key stage 3 and key stage 4 yet feel unable to transfer these skills into an 'A' Level classroom for fear of their students' failing to assimilate enough material for the examination. This book seeks to overcome this fear through

considering how an 'A' Level classroom can become a captivating classroom driven by learning and the teacher's and students' enjoyment of the learning that takes place there.

This chapter demonstrates a series of more interesting and innovative strategies to create a positive and challenging learning environment for your students. Some of the techniques will be well-known to you in your 11–16 teaching; if they are recognizable to you they will also be familiar to your students and most people enjoy a sense of security in their learning. Many of the strategies discussed are built around long-practised ideas of active learning, for those readers unfamiliar with this approach to learning this means students have to be involved in their learning through interaction and physical activity rather than passive listening and reading. Techniques are discussed in theoretical and practical terms and exemplified through subject examples. All the strategies have been tried and tested on a range of post-16 students and revised and updated accordingly. A particular practice may not be written for a physics or physical education lesson but with your specialist expertise and a little creativity, an idea can be adapted to suit the needs of a laboratory or a playing field rather than a classroom.

1. Talking

Teachers like to talk; at 'A' Level we love to speak as we can indulge our passion for our subject with a group of students we readily believe are hanging on our every word. AS and A2 students however can be reluctant to enter into discussion and this can lead to the classroom becoming a static environment where learning takes place through the written and not the oral medium. This section will consider the nature of classroom discussion and how the students can become more active participants without losing the necessary depth of knowledge required at post-16 level.

Without question, teacher exposition is a necessary and important classroom tool. It is arguably of greater value within an 'A' Level classroom, where complex subject knowledge needs to be made clear to students if they are to move forward with their learning. Effective teacher explanation requires two key skills; the first to be able to gain and maintain your audiences attention and second to pitch the exposition at the correct level. This can be challenging in an 'A' Level classroom where you have students who achieved GCSE grades ranging from C–A* and have predicted AS and A2 grades from E–A*.

It is important to remember how very mixed in ability an 'A' Level classroom is. Post-16 the majority of teacher talk will be for cognitive rather than procedural or for managerial purposes. The 1992 National Oracy Project suggested that in an 11–16 environment, two-thirds of lessons are talk, two-thirds of that talk is teacher talk and two-thirds of that talk is about management and procedure rather than content. It therefore follows that if there is less procedural or managerial talk there should be less teacher talk as a proportion of the lesson. At 'A' Level the temptation can be to fill the void and talk more about cognitive issues; this can of course be beneficial to the students but look at it in a different way; if you do not need to talk as much then save the most valuable asset you have, that of your voice, and encourage different types of talk between the class as a group and sub-groups within the class.

Speaking in a classroom should be a participatory event. Evidence from the KS3 National Literacy Strategy has proven that learning is increased when students engage in dialogue about their topic or subject. This poses many questions for the teacher to consider when planning dialogue in a lesson.

- ◆ What can student talk appear like?
- ◆ How do you plan for it?
- ◆ How do you ensure all students are involved?
- ◆ How do you keep talk on task?
- ◆ When should you interrupt or end the discussion?
- ◆ How do you assess whether the talk has been purposeful and beneficial to the objectives of the lesson?

Discussion is most effective as a learning process rather than just an activity and will need to be planned for within the broader framework of the lesson. In addition to this; answers to the previous questions will need to be formulated in advance of the lesson in order to maximize the potential of your students. Below are a list of strategies you can use with your students to help develop talking techniques.

Whole class talk

Talk Tokens. Each individual has a given number of talk tokens that they have to use within a discussion. These can be as simple as plastic coins or lollypop sticks or something more creative such as an illustrated laminated card. Students have to aim to use all their tokens

within a discussion, they cannot be traded or bargained for, once their tokens are used up they will have to wait for more tokens to become available or write down their comment for later use. Providing a pack of sticky-notes to each group can be helpful to record unheard contributions. For a talkative student who can be prone to dominate the discussion they will have to think before they talk and use their tokens wisely. After a few attempts they will quickly realize that wasting tokens early on in less analytical and cognitive aspects of the discussion will frustrate and impede their learning. You may choose to give a more talkative student fewer tokens to really challenge their use of contributions and listening skills. Handle such an approach with sensitivity. They will hopefully become wise with their words and think much more before they talk.

For a quiet student, having to speak can be an intimidating and overwhelming experience and the teacher needs to be sensitive in handling these students. In the first instances give these students less tokens but make sure there are secure, signposted, opportunities for them to use them. Use directed questioning as an entry route into the discussion and give praise to the student as often as possible. Over time, increase the number of their tokens and remove the scaffold you have provided.

As with any method of learning some students will have their preferences but this approach demonstrates that opting out of discussion is simply not an option. A student would not be allowed to choose to not write up their methodology or demonstrate mathematical working out and equally the benefits of discussing their learning are too great to grant a student the liberty of not contributing to class discussion. A variation of this is to have a talking stick or cuddly toy that is passed around the group whenever someone wishes to speak but you are only allowed a limited number of goes and the same person cannot speak in succession. This can interrupt the flow of discussion but works well in a question and answer style dialogue where the teacher is posing the questions rather than a free-flowing debate.

Extended Talk. Extended talk also encourages each member of the class to contribute and effectively silences the dominant student who simply loves the sound of his or her own voice. The teacher poses the opening question for discussion and students are only allowed to contribute if their response or comment brings a new point to the deliberations. This means that a student cannot repeat or reiterate a statement already made; their contribution has to be new and different and must either challenge, support or extend a comment already

made. This can be difficult for students at first and there are often long interludes as students pause for thought. The teacher must be patient and students will get used to this formal style of discussion if used frequently and regularly. This requires the teacher to prepare the questions to be posed in advance to ensure they have the necessary challenge. (See Chapter Three for further discussion of questioning).

A Psychology debate relating to the explanation of criminal behaviour could employ an extended talk technique as many students' may feel the need to reinforce the same point rather than introduce new case studies to extend, counter or conclude upon the arguments raised. Upbringing, cognition and behaviour will all require consideration and extended talk is a way of ensuring coverage and development within the topic. Skills of critical thinking clarity, credibility, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance and fairness can also be demonstrated and assessed through extended talk debate.

Audience Talk. Audience talk is a way of getting students to think about whom they are talking to and who might be listening to their discussion. Many teachers of 'A' Level are used to using audience in written work but do they identify with a sense of audience during classroom dialogue? Ask the students to imagine there is someone in the classroom listening to their dialogue or banter in the lesson and that they must adjust their speech accordingly. For example, it could be someone fun like Granny or little brother or it could be a university lecturer in their subject or a scribe who needs to take notes from the class. Ask the class to consider what impact this would have on the way they talk to you and to each other. Are they speaking in plainer language for the benefits of a younger sibling or using a far more complex vocabulary in order to impress the expert in the field? Either way the use of subject-specific terminology, level of explanation and depth of synthesis will all need to be accounted for and in turn this will raise the importance of classroom dialogue in a student's learning process.

Small group talk

Paired Talk. Paired talk has immense benefit in involving the student who is less keen on speaking in front of the whole group. A teacher will need keen ears and a clearly defined volume control to ensure an acceptable working milieu. There are clear advantages to

using small group talk and methods such as 'think, pair, share' can ensure thinking time as well as talking time. With paired talk however it is important not to force students to repeat or summarize the findings of their small group discussion. Not only can this be tedious and time consuming in an 'A' Level classroom but consider what benefits it actually brings to the learning of the students? The teacher should use the time during paired talk to wander around the classroom listening in to the discussion and posing more challenging questions to the small groups who require it. The teacher can take this opportunity to record points of interest that are worthy of whole class discussion and can move the knowledge and understanding of the whole class forward. If talk is unnecessarily repetitive it can become dull and boring and have little value in students' repertoire of learning tools.

It is worth considering at this stage how a teacher might group students and the merits and demerits of mixing abilities against the advantages and disadvantages of matching similar abilities together. Small group discussion is the perfect opportunity for students to develop their oral skills through working with like-minded students. Students are exposed to the vast ability range in an 'A' Level classroom every day so it could be argued why replicate this in a small group discussion environment? Allowing more-able students to extend their thinking further with the challenging dialogue of like-minded students can accelerate their subject skills and encourage the student to think and speak like a mathematician or a geographer instead of a merely a student of maths or geography. Similarly allowing the less-able student to consolidate their learning and ask their own questions will provide this less confident student with the necessary support framework for their learning.

Summary

Participating in discussion is a vital aspect of an 'A' Level classroom and an essential pre-requisite to advanced learning. Yet it is an area in which students can often be reluctant to participate in. Plan a discussion technique into each lesson in order to build student's self-esteem and plan for progression in this area. 'A' Level students are slightly older Year 11's for their first term yet teachers often expect erudite discourse

worthy of undergraduate study. In the same way that students are only able to write at an 'A' Level standard through effective teacher planning of writing in the chosen genre and by modelling examples of the intended outcome; classroom talk also needs to be planned for in exactly the same way and by using a variety of well-chosen techniques. This can be enormously exciting and stimulating for everyone involved.

2. Note taking

Consider a sequence of two 'A' Level lessons. The teacher enters the classroom and informs the students of today's topic for discussion. Students are expected to frantically take notes as the teacher indulges in their monologue with the students having no understanding as to why they are taking the notes in the first place other than because they were told to. The lesson ends with the teacher handing out a resource or text book and asking students to take notes from this for next lesson.

Next lesson comes and the topic of note taking is under discussion but the notes themselves are given little value or consideration within the lesson itself. The lesson continues with further note taking from the teacher and concludes with students being set an extended examination based question.

Both lessons are fulfilling the requirements of the 'A' Level specifications and students' are assimilating the required knowledge base in order to pass their exam, so where is the problem? Look again at the two lesson sequence and consider the following questions:

1. From what medium are the students acquiring knowledge?
2. Will the students retain this knowledge?
3. Do the students see value in the activity they are undertaking?
4. How will their note taking skills improve?
5. Will the students become better in the subject?

'Captivating your class,' through note taking may appear to be a contradiction in terms yet it is a pre-requisite of any 'A' Level student's learning repertoire and should therefore be taught in as interesting a way as possible. Through giving thought to which notes

are most effective for a given purpose or audience, the students will immediately be involved in the process of note taking thus making it a more reflective and interesting activity. It is usual and necessary for students to take notes in an 'A' Level classroom as notes form the basis of all students work. For an 'A' Level student, their notes serve many purposes. If these purposes can be understood by both teacher and student, the methodology of note taking can be taught in a more interesting and ultimately effective way.

In most instances notes are made for short-term and long-term purposes. In the short term they allow students to sort out ideas of a given topic or methodology and aid planning. Also, in the short term students may require notes to help them sort out and shape their ideas and thinking. These notes are unlikely to be used as a record of learning and their appearance will be radically different to long term notes. Ideas do not come in neat compartmentalized boxes and students' short-term notes do not need to be either. Short-term notes can also be used to aid planning; most writers like to plan before they begin a full draft of an assignment. Each subject will have its own purpose for the use of notes in the short term. For example, in modern foreign languages they can be used for simple vocabulary or to explain a more complex grammatical structure. In Geography they can explain key features of an environmental feature or for capturing evidence gathered on a field study. If students are being set an extended piece of work or assignment they will need to note down key points and ideas they wish to include in their work. The purpose for note taking in this form is very different again and it is likely that long-term notes will be used to support these short-term planning notes. It is unlikely these notes will be retained for future reference and can take a variety of forms which are discussed later in this section.

Long-term notes are used as both a record of learning and to aid understanding. Many of the topics students study in their AS and A2 courses will not be examined until several months after they have studied them. It is therefore important to retain a record of these topics for immediate and future use. If notes are for future use they will be different in appearance from those for immediate use. They will need to be:

- ◆ legible;
- ◆ with clear meaning – especially if to record an argument or interpretation;