
Birmingham City University Principles of Learning & Teaching

Part 1 Introduction

This document sets out our principles of learning and teaching and links firmly to the concepts within the University Academic Plan and strategic transformational objectives.

As a practice-led, knowledge-applied university we are keen to ensure our provision is firmly focussed on delivering learning and teaching that reflects this. We recognise that many subjects have their own specific pedagogical approaches, particularly in relation to skills - for example, simulation is a key approach in health, construction is important in engineering, practical demonstrations are used extensively in design and performance tutorials are an essential component of music courses. This document attempts to provide focus on those areas we all have in common - how we effectively create new understandings in the minds of students, how we build skills, and how we inspire our students to become true partners in the learning experience. The following are a set of key principles that academic colleagues can use to inform decisions about methods, strategies, technology, space, organisation, timetabling and staffing.

We are unashamed in our commitment to quality, professional development and a rich and vibrant learning experience for all of our students. Our University is clear in its strategy that we provide *transformational* learning – and this is a key thread that informs our delivery.

Delivery Modes

The majority of our students might currently be described as ‘full time campus based’. However, the traditional view of a student is not appropriate for the dynamic environment within our 21st Century University. Our students are of all ages and come from a wide range of backgrounds. Many are from minority ethnic backgrounds and many are the first in their family to attend university. The vast majority are paying fees and most full-time students have to work part time to support their studies. Some of our students are already in full-time employment and managing their studies alongside demanding jobs and family commitments. Many students have dependant family members and cultural and religious obligations. There are an increasing number of students who are part-time, studying flexibly or learning via on-line and distance learning provision. Some of our students are overseas. It is important therefore that our teaching and learning strategies are flexible to meet the needs of our students. The principles laid out in this document are in themselves flexible enough to be applied across a range of delivery modes.

How Students Learn

Understanding something of how students learn is central to making decisions about how we teach. There is a wide variety of literature on this subject and there are many and varied theories that have

been put forward in an attempt to explain this extremely complex process. At Birmingham City University we consider theories generally described as **constructivist** or **social constructivist** to be the most compelling. For constructivists learning is considered to be a change in schemata (structures of understanding). Knowledge and understanding is constructed within the mind of the individual through an active process of making meanings. Although assimilation (the fitting of new information into existing structures) is a key process in learning, accommodation (the changing of pre-existing structures) is a more important consideration when considering **deep** approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö 1976, Biggs 1993). Constructivism asserts that both processes happen simultaneously and where accommodation fails, learning approaches tend to be, at best, **surface** in nature. Social constructivists assert that the construction of knowledge is an **active process** that happens at a socio-cultural level first and foremost and then later in the mind of the individual. The descriptions in this document all flow from the assertion that constructivism and social constructivism provide the best general descriptions of how students learn and that students will gain most from our curricula if they are *active* rather than passive in their learning.

Lectures and lecturers

The title lecturer **should not and does not imply that the main function of the role is to present lectures**. Indeed there will be some lecturers who never give 'traditional' lectures. Our assumption is that 'lecturers' will provide a wide variety of learning opportunities with their students, that they will regard their students as partners in the learning process and that they will work as part of an overall academic community consisting of lecturers, students and other partners (for example employers).

Whilst it is accepted that lectures can have a place in a broad, balanced university curriculum - for example, keynote addresses, whole cohort briefings etc.- if done in a very traditional manner they can be little more than opportunities for the bulk transmission of information. Given the key aspects described below, many academics would find that lecturing cannot meet the necessary conditions for active learning.

At our University, lecturers recognise the importance of a varied and appropriate learning experience. Our students are firmly partners in learning and we set this expectation from the very start of their learning journey.

Identity

Birmingham City University states clearly its desire to be, '*recognised as the leading University for creative and professional practice-based education in the UK*' (Strategic Plan, p4). We are lucky to have a vibrant mix of academic staff. Many have worked previously in industry and public services, and have an excellent experience base to inform their teaching. Some have come through a postgraduate route often related to research and continue to be active researchers. All colleagues are scholars and have current knowledge bases on which to develop practice-led learning.

But as well as ‘knowing’, ‘researching’ and ‘practicing’, in becoming an academic at Birmingham City University academic colleagues accept that teaching is a key aspect of their role, that the students enrolled on our courses expect and deserve the best possible learning experience and therefore, all academics define themselves as ‘**Learning & Teaching Professionals**’.

Part 2 Key Aspects of our Approach to Learning & Teaching

- 1 Transition Teaching and learning design should, particularly at level 4 or when moving from undergraduate to post-graduate study, take into account the fact that students are transitioning into our University from a variety of educational experiences. It should also be borne in mind that this is often happening at a time of significant personal change (moving away from home, being responsible for their own welfare, taking on a new job role etc.). Students will need learning and teaching experiences that provide a supportive, nurturing scaffold for this transition. The work of transition should begin before students arrive through initiatives such as ‘Level Up’ or similar. Once enrolled, early use of group work, project based learning, discursive activities, activities outside of the classroom etc. can all help to support transition. Formative learning activities are crucial to building confidence in and understanding of the expectations in higher education. Assessment should support this confidence building and provide valuable feedback opportunities to support continuous development.
- 2 Alignment All teaching and learning experiences should be part of a constructively aligned curriculum (*Biggs & Tang, 2011*). An aligned curriculum is one in which there is a clear and direct link between the intended learning outcomes, the summative assessment and the teaching methods and materials. To this end, all taught sessions should have specific objectives, reference both the module outcomes and the summative assessment and ensure that it is explicit to the students what the links are. Learning Outcomes should be proportionate and clear so that students are able to learn effectively and understand the requirements of the module.
- 3 Active approaches and formative teaching Active learning does not just mean that students should be physically active, although this is clearly the case when developing practical skills. Students at this university should be expected to be ‘mentally active’ rather than passive in their learning. An active approach to learning can be encouraged by group work,

focussed practical tasks, live projects, discussion and feedback etc. *Formative* learning opportunities are crucial to building confidence, understanding and a partnership approach to the learning experience.

The following five tasks are key to creating a successful formative teaching environment (*William & Thompson, 2007*):

- i. Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions
- ii. Engineering effective discussions, activities and tasks that elicit evidence of learning
- iii. Providing feedback that moves the learner forward
- iv. Activating learners as resources for one another
- v. Activating learners as owners of their own learning

- 4 Current understanding All students have a current understanding of the subject being taught. It is tempting to consider this only in relation to entry requirements (e.g. A levels, BTEC etc.) or study on previous modules. However all students carry with them a range of conceptions and misconceptions generated through interactions with peers, professionals, literature, media and personal experiences. Exploring, exposing and challenging these conceptions and misconceptions is an essential part of the learning process and activities need to be designed to allow this to happen. In this way, the knowledge-based element of our practice-led learning can be enhanced and developed.
- 5 Knowledge All programmes have a clear and well defined knowledge base. Teaching knowledge at university has been traditionally done through lectures. This generally produces a superficial understanding of knowledge and does not encourage deeper learning. Whilst it is essential to ensure students have a keen awareness of key concepts within a module or programme, in order to make the most productive use of time and space academics should look for opportunities to provide knowledge based materials *in advance* of taught sessions. This can be done through pre-sessional tasks, reading, interactive learning objects, on-line materials and video lectures, for example. Face-to-face time can then be used more productively discussing the issues raised, debating the meaning and developing criticality. This also engages the student as a partner in learning – requiring them to fully engage with content and encouraging wider reading and research.
- 6 Skills Many programmes require students to develop a very particular and specific skillset. The principles of active learning apply equally in these situations. Skill based sessions also need clearly defined outcomes and opportunities for discussions and questions. It is important that such sessions are not merely

‘hands-on’ but ‘minds-on’ as well.

Developing skills sometimes means that the student has to experiment or to experience failure before they gain the level of skill required. It is important to manage this carefully so that students feel able to ‘fail’ and try again in a supportive atmosphere. In some instances, for example health related programmes – skills development is literally a matter of life or death – so the importance of skills development within proper professional frameworks is crucial and colleagues will work to ensure professional standards are met at all times.

It is also important that our students are able to recognise and articulate the skills they have or are developing. As academic professionals we will ensure that they have a clear understanding of this.

7 Placement

All programmes at Birmingham City University are required to have placement opportunities. It is important that these are integrated in to the teaching and learning strategy of the programme that they are associated with. For example, placements should be co-designed with employers, they need clearly defined activities & outcomes and communication and discussion with and between students should continue during placements.

‘Placement’ may encompass work shadowing, internships, observation visits, work-based projects, community projects in the not for profit sector, sandwich placement years etc.

It is important that our students feel encouraged and supported to engage with placement activity and that they recognise the clear advantage this brings in relation to their own personal and career development.

The Graduate+ programme available to all students provides further opportunity for students to engage with placement activity.

8 Risk taking

Academic staff are invited to take risks. That is not to say, reckless unsubstantiated experimenting on a cohort of students but the trying out of new ideas and new approaches based on reading and research into educational research and scholarship. Students should also be encouraged to take risks with their learning rather than always ‘playing it safe’, they should be engaged in decision making processes and be part of the evaluation of the success of new teaching & learning developments. The opportunity to work in partnership with students in the development of new learning opportunities is a key strength of Birmingham City University’s provision.

- 9 New Technologies All colleagues are expected to make use of new technologies where appropriate. This includes, but is not limited to, the use of the interactive features of the VLE such as discussion forums (debating ideas), quizzes (formative testing of knowledge and understanding) and workshops (peer review). Other Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, audience response systems and wikis can also be used to create an active, engaging experience for students.
- Many colleagues use social media to support programme identity and this is an interesting way to encourage a sense of community and interaction. However, colleagues must ensure that Data Protection protocols are observed and that there is a clear line between 'work related' social media and 'personal' social media. It is important that our students are able to understand the difference between 'professional' use of social media and 'social' use.
- It is important that all programmes use interactive technology to support the learning experience – in this way our provision becomes more flexible and more able to meet the needs of a variety of students – both home, overseas and distance learners. For support in relation to the development of interactive learning activities contact CELT.
- 10 Summative Assessment Summative assessment activities are those things that students are required to do to pass modules. Sometimes the grade given in a summative assessment is used to calculate a final award such as a degree classification. Summative assessments must be aligned with the programme and module defined outcomes and the learning and teaching experiences. All taught sessions should reference both the module outcomes and the summative assessment and ensure that it is explicit to the students what the links are. Assessment should not be seen as simply a 'means to an end' but should be a positive learning and developmental experience. It should be useful to the student and give them ample opportunity to demonstrate their learning. Assessment should always be clearly aligned with the learning outcomes of the programme and module.
- Finally, assessment should inspire confidence and an enthusiasm for the learning process and must always be accompanied by useful feedback and guidance.
- 11 Inclusivity At Birmingham City University we pride ourselves on our inclusive approach. Teaching and learning activities should reflect this. Clearly, no student should be disadvantaged due to race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability. However inclusive practice is more than this in that, wherever possible and practical, *all* teaching and learning should be designed in such a way as to be appropriate for all.

- 12 Expectations Students will have their own expectations for a university experience. These will be formed through discussions with family, friends, teachers, lecturers and employers, many of whom will have a very specific personal experience of university study that may be out of date or at odds with different to the Birmingham City University approach. Similarly popular culture (TV programmes, films etc.) often portray a very traditional view of university, presenting students as learning in large lecture theatres or in wood panelled tutorial rooms. Learning experiences should not only ensure that students engage in an active learning approach but explicitly and confidently expose students to the rationale behind the approach and engage them in helping to co-design experiences. It is important that students experience the 'Birmingham City University approach' from their first exposure to us through, for example, course promotional materials, open days and applicant visit day activities (for example, an open day 'workshop' activity sends a more appropriate message than an example 'lead lecture').
- 13 Professional development in learning & teaching All academic staff are expected to engage in continuing professional development in the area of learning and teaching. It is important that we are able to clearly demonstrate our authority to teach. The UKPSF (United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework, HEA: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/recognition-accreditation/uk-professional-standards-framework-ukpsf>) sets out the areas of engagement, core knowledge and professional values expected. Birmingham City University runs an accreditation scheme and all staff are expected to achieve the status of 'Fellow of the HEA'. Fellowship can be achieved through either an individual route or through completion of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education run by CELT.
- All academic colleagues are expected to demonstrate their authority to teach by having a formally recognised teaching qualification and/or Fellowship of the HEA. It is also a clear expectation that colleagues engage with regular continuing professional development relating to learning and teaching – including progression to HEA Senior or Principal Fellowship in due course and engagement with professional development activities such as courses, conferences, engagement with subject specific networks and professional networks relevant to their programmes (for example engagement with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development if you teach Human Resource Management).
- Colleagues may also need to regularly engage with professional up-dating and formal CPD recognition from their professional body. In such instances, Faculties will support this and colleagues are expected to maintain professional records as required. In addition to management led observations where staff can receive feedback from senior colleagues, each department should have arrangements for peer observation. Peer observations are an extremely effective way of developing practice. CELT provides advice and guidance (including proforma) to enable academics to get the most out of the process. CELT also runs a suite of development courses on a range of topics related to learning & teaching up to and including an MEd degree. These courses are centrally funded and incur no cost to individuals or departments.

Learning & Teaching Manifesto
Dear Student,

It is the aim of BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY to create a thriving professionally based environment where **you will....**

If you take up the opportunities offered and work together with our staff then **you almost certainly won't...**

engage in a range of learning activities in a variety of high quality environments, both physical and electronic.

sit and be lectured at all day.

be active - both mentally and physically.

be a passive recipient of knowledge.

be taught by innovative, creative staff making effective use of new learning technologies.

only study in traditional, formal settings.

be well prepared for assessment tasks and get regular constructive feedback.

be confused about your grades or how to improve.

be expected to push yourself, consider, and act upon, your own individual development.

do 'just enough' to get by.

interact with and learn from students across a range of disciplines and cultures.

work in isolation.

develop as an individual, with a global awareness of what it means to be a citizen of the 21st Century.

be ignorant of the wider world.

be expected to be curious, interested, inquisitive and want to find out more about your subject.

be indifferent to your subject.

be supported to research your own interests and receive advice and guidance needed to make informed decisions.

only do as you are told.

work with knowledgeable, well qualified staff who are passionate about your area of study.

meet people that don't care for your subject.

receive the support you need if things start to go wrong.

be left alone to sink or swim.

know that your course was co-designed by the people who are going to employ you afterwards.

be out of touch with reality.

have opportunities to develop hard and soft skills working with those future employers.

gain knowledge and skills you can't use.

be part of a learning community where everyone, staff and students alike, continually seek to improve.

stand still.

be supported by, and be supportive of, other students.

be a poor team worker.

engage in ongoing communication and evaluation with staff and help make decisions about teaching and learning.

just get what you are given.

enjoy the experience.

be turned off learning.

know that when you graduate you are still a part of the Birmingham City University family and could be invited to help co-design the next generation of courses.

ever really leave Birmingham City University.