



## 3.4 Lifehacks for teaching

This module has reviewed how teaching practices can support student wellbeing and has provided examples of strategies that educators have used to support student wellbeing. While some of the strategies may seem fairly straightforward, in reality, for busy academics with competing (and pressing) demands, it may be challenging to implement major curriculum changes or find new ways to facilitate learning in the short term. Many academics, particularly sessional teachers, may face constraints in what they can do in curriculum design and in their teaching practice. In this section we offer seven simple tips that all time-poor academic educators can use (with little preparation) to increase autonomy-supportive learning environments and support student wellbeing.

### 1. Show students that you are interested in getting to know them, their backgrounds, interests and aspirations

- A. **Ask your admissions office** (or students centre) for a break down of the backgrounds of students in your course (e.g. international, mature aged, first in family etc.). Mention in the early weeks that you are aware of the diversity you have in the class, citing relevant enrolment data.
- B. **Seek information from students** about themselves.
  - **For large classes**, use your online learning management system to administer a simple questionnaire (perhaps multiple choice) asking students about a few questions themselves – for example, their prior learning in the subject area; their main interests in the subject; any relevant work or practical experience; and skills they believe they need to develop further (e.g. writing skills, reading etc.). The automatically generated report will provide you with a snapshot of students' interests.
  - **For smaller classes**, it can be informative to ask students to write a paragraph introducing themselves – you may want to ask students to comment on their prior learning, their interests or what they hope to get out of the subject.
- C. **Communicate to students** what you know about the group and tell them (judiciously) what you have learned from their questionnaire responses or written introductions (e.g., the group's prior learning, interests, experience). Also let students know how this information will inform what you do in the subject or how the subject will address their interests and goals.

### 2. Help students connect with their peers from day 1.

There are many examples of icebreaker activities (for instance, [this list](#) provided by Deb Peterson, and [this list](#) provided by Susan M. Heathfield). Here are our easy and time-efficient strategies for the first class (and subsequent classes):

- A. **Give student 5 minutes to meet the person sitting next to them** (or in front/behind) and find the answer to two questions: 1) "What is the main reason you're doing this subject?" 2) "What's been the highlight of your university experience so far?"
- B. At the end of the 5 minutes, put up a multiple choice of possible reasons for the first question: a) "because I have to"; b) "I'm interested in the subject"; c) "I heard it's a good/easy subject" d) "other". Ask for a show of hands (or use auto-response technology), and ask for a couple of examples from people who chose "other" (there will usually be some humorous responses, which will help create a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere).
- C. In the next class, give students a couple of minutes again to talk to the person next to them, but remember to give them a specific task or question for them to talk about.

- D. **If you're teaching online**, ask students to post a 30-second video introducing themselves or to post an introductory paragraph and respond to at least one other student's post. Some online lecturers also set up a short quiz or poll to help students get to know each other.

**3. Help students feel that they can relate to you and that you understand the pressures they face.**

- A. **Tell students something about yourself**, in class, or as an introduction to yourself online: what interests you most about the subject, what you enjoy most about teaching and/or a challenge you have faced and overcome in academic life (e.g., grappling with statistics or overcoming a dread of public speaking). The goal here is to help students feel that you are relatable and that you understand that the subject material can sometimes be hard to grasp.
- B. **Acknowledge the pressures students face** (e.g., from assessment tasks in other subjects/units) and assist them to meet their commitments in your unit/subject by letting them know where you expect them to be up to at key points. Also, to help students feel supported, communicate encouragingly (face-to-face, email or posting online) at important times in the semester (e.g., to wish them well for mid-semester break, to remind them of your (limited) availability around assignment due dates, and to wish them well for exams during Swot Vac).

**4. Help students feel they have input into the subject.**

- A. In the beginning of the subject, tell students what you have used from the last subject evaluation results and how you have tried to take student feedback into consideration. Or, if this is the first time you're teaching the subject, tell them about what the student feedback has been in other related subjects has been. The goal here is to help students feel that you are taking students' views into consideration.
- B. After a few weeks, administer a mid-semester survey and ask for student feedback (e.g. 1) What is helping you learn in this subject? 2) What is hindering your learning in this subject 3) What suggestions do you have for the rest of semester?) Then address the comments in the following class by letting students know what you can and will change and what you can't change and why.

**5. Communicate that the subject matter is intrinsically interesting.**

- A. Being enthusiastic about the subject you're teaching is one thing, but it's important that you communicate this enthusiasm. Tell students why the subject is fascinating, why it's important to learn and how it's related to the world around them. Show enthusiasm for teaching and tell students that this is one of your favourite subjects to teach. Or as one experienced lecturer said, "even if you're not very passionate about the subject, or teaching, make students think you are so they become more engaged and positive about the subject ". Another tip from an experienced educator is to look at a funny you-tube clip or listen to an upbeat piece of music before entering the class.

**6. Show students that their subject has relevance to the world around them.**

- A. From the first class and throughout the subject, help students to connect what they're learning to the world around them. This could mean helping students see the relevance of what they're learning to potential future jobs, or to events and issues in society more broadly. One useful tip is to get students to send you current articles and/or video clips that they come across (including in various social media that they use) and then mash them together as a resource for all students.

**7. Make students feel that they have the ability to learn and succeed.**

- A. Set a fairly easy task early on in the subject so that students succeed and see that learning is achievable in the subject, perhaps by asking students to draw on their prior learning and experiences. Give encourage positive feedback early on and remind students that while the material can be challenging, it is possible for everyone to do well with some effort.
- B. Also help create a climate where students feel free to make mistakes by reminding them that they will probably make mistakes, like you did when you first encountered the subject, but that this is a positive and normal part of the learning process.