

Learning and Teaching

Teaching Offshore

When we teach offshore we take La Trobe University into the global education arena. How we teach represents the quality of a La Trobe education to the world. If we can offer a personalised approach to students whilst demonstrating quality research-based teaching, our University can establish strong cultural, social and economic ties with other countries and cultures.

Teaching offshore offers us rewarding challenges but also confronts us with different traditions, expectations, living conditions and our own ability to respond to the unexpected. Our taken-for-granted attitudes may be turned upside down in a myriad of ways. This TIPS, and associated websites and workshops, are resources to help you navigate the University's requirements, handle the layers of administration, and reflect about your offshore teaching.

Effective Teaching in Offshore Classrooms

The lectures we give at home are language-rich, laced with metaphors and idioms, and illustrated with Australian examples. However, this style of lecture is difficult to grasp for non-native speakers and those who have never lived in Australia or had exposure to Australian culture or people. There may be a great mismatch between students' level of English and what we expect them to read, hear and understand. Generally, international students at La Trobe take three months to just train their ear to hear the sounds of our English clearly. Offshore, our students might have as little as four days to tune into our language and accent. However, there are many ways to assist students understand our lectures.

At the beginning...introductions

- Write your name on the board, say it clearly, tell students how they can address you.
- Tell them a little about yourself, your family, your university, your travels, your research, your interests.
- Hand out cards or folded over A4 paper; ask students to write their name and place it in front of them so you can see it.
- Discover who your students are and their level of English by asking them to introduce themselves, pronouncing their names clearly or use this opportunity to get students to talk to each other and then introduce their classmate to the group.

- Ask them where they come from, the work or study they do, where they hope their study will lead them.
- Set a pattern of students speaking English in front of the class, and interacting with you.
- Sometimes some of this can be done ahead of your face-to-face class using websites, email or WebCT.
- Explain the format of the class eg. When the breaks will be and for how long (these should be regular but brief to help with student and staff concentration).

During lectures and small groups... making yourself understood

- Take your time, speak more clearly than usual – be aware of your speaking pace and tone of voice. It is often not the pace but the clarity of speech which causes difficulties for students. Try not to use acronyms or slang.
- Show that you are introducing a key point by tone of voice and indicating with your hands.
- Keep sentences short and repeat key terms and points.
- Be aware of terms that may be new to students – define them on the board, pronounce them clearly, use the board often to illustrate these terms.
- Decide what is most important, be prepared to leave out the rest.
- Check regularly if students have any questions or if they understand. Watch body language to help identify students who may feel uncomfortable admitting to lack of understanding.

Find different ways to get the point across

- Use examples – local examples wherever you can.
- Ask students if they can give examples.
- Use case studies.
- Make illustrations, diagrams.
- Hand out brief notes or summaries for students to follow in class, and summarise after key points.

Working outside your comfort zone

Before reading the rest of this TIPS sheet, reflect on a time when you:

- had to leave your comfort zone;
- were challenged to think outside your own perspective;
- found it difficult to understand different ways of doing things;
- were tested in your capacity to listen and empathise;
- found you could not understand or be understood;
- had to be substantially self-sufficient in a foreign place;
- had to demonstrate flexibility and 'keeping your cool' amidst change;
- had to teach semester-long courses in two weeks.

You will be challenged and changed!

TIPS

At the end...

- Summarise the content verbally and visually.
- Relate content to specific textbook chapters.
- Point to further resources if they are available.
- Encourage students to work together on specific concepts or problems.

When computers fail... have a Plan B!

PowerPoint can be an excellent aid but be prepared for power failures – have backup for computer-dependent materials. Know your material well enough to use only blackboard and chalk. Remember that La Trobe University internal servers cannot be accessed offshore!

Issues with Offshore Teaching

Different cultures, different countries

Can we teach the same way?

We bring to offshore students our own culture, language and educational background. We bring our own discipline knowledges, course structures and teaching approaches. But we may know little about the local society and economy, the education system, student aspirations and language skills. We may not have the background to apply our knowledge to local examples, or to build on the prior knowledge of our students. Indeed, we may have no idea of their learning priorities. In some institutions, we will also be dependent on local translators who may have little knowledge of our discipline. Two things are certain: the students' language and educational experiences are different from ours. We need to build bridges in both areas and learn from our students.

Critical questioning or transfer of knowledge?

Cultures and, indeed, disciplines put different values on these two poles of learning. Our offshore students may be accustomed to reproduction of teachers' notes and texts. This can be due to working from scant resources or honouring knowledge of respected teachers and scholars.

We may want our students to problem-solve, question, evaluate, form their own opinions, weigh an argument, and give evidence for a conclusion. Students need time to learn new approaches. Provide models, opportunities for practice and constructive feedback to build their confidence and capacity to achieve these skills.

Teaching with Translators

In some countries you may be dependent on translators. Much of your lecture time will be taken up by translation. Even if translators are not used, many students will be trying to translate what you say or write on the board. Much is lost in either case. Translators may be unfamiliar with some of your material, making it doubly difficult for students to understand the content.

Concentration is difficult for students whose attention must switch between you and the translator, between one language and another. To maintain as much continuity as possible:

- Keep your language simple and direct.
- Moderate your pace and tone.
- Establish a communication strategy with your translators before lectures.
- Help your translators to feel at ease with your material by going through it beforehand.
- Identify key terms and concepts and write on the board in both languages.
- Use diagrams, case studies and local examples so that translators can communicate concepts more easily.

Maximising Learning in Lectures with Translators

- Plan to have half the usual time to get your points across – focus on the most essential material.
- Use visual media such as a blackboard, overhead transparencies and PowerPoint to actively track through the key points.
- Summarise regularly during the lecture.
- Keep eye contact with your students while the translator is speaking.
- Link your last point with the next on the board, overhead or handout.
- Ensure students have access to content written in their own language through translated materials.

Small Group Teaching

You can use groups to gain insight into students' level of understanding, and learn about relevant local examples. However, students who have had little experience of working in groups may be resistant at first – it is a big step from receiving information from an expert to listening to others critically and giving one's own opinion. Give clear guidelines to students on how to work in groups. **See TIPS: Teaching Small Groups for details <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip>**

Structure groups by:

- assigning and rotating roles such as leader, recorder, timekeeper, summariser and reporter;
- establishing a timeline for tasks to be done;
- checking at an early stage that each group is going well, addressing problems early;
- clearly defining learning outcomes in terms of process – speaking, listening, responding, building on others' points, and content – articulating a point of view, arguing, giving evidence, making a case, reaching a conclusion.

Persevere! Many students have said that initially they found working in groups difficult, but given time, they gained confidence in speaking up and handling the subject matter.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is culturally loaded. In one culture, copying may equate to stealing or cheating; in another, copying may equate to reverence for given knowledge. Lack of resources such as books, computers and libraries mean that many students have had very limited access to texts and cope with scarcity by copying and learning by rote.

Writing in another language is challenging, and copying often stems from a lack of confidence to do so. Teach students how to reference their work to maintain our university's reputation for academic excellence. Provide models of how to reference, and time to learn the skills. **See the La Trobe University web resources on plagiarism: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/plagiarism>**

In **lectures**, make a point of highlighting:

- how the ideas you have constructed come from the work of others;
- how you are using and acknowledging the work of others;
- how you construct your argument by combining the views of a number of authors on an issue.

In **tutorials**, teach students:

- how to paraphrase, using short exercises (see below);
- the level of paraphrasing required to acceptably alter the original words;
- the distinction between 'common knowledge' and information that needs to be referenced;
- how to use an efficient note-taking system to distinguish between the student's own words and those of others;
- how to find and extract short statements or ideas to support an argument.

In **assignments**, assist students by:

- giving practice assignments to develop referencing skills;
- using marking schemes that include feedback on referencing.

Short exercises to develop academic integrity

In the first tutorial, give students seven minutes to summarise a short piece from a textbook. Make your own summary on an overhead transparency. Ask two or three students to read out their summaries; commend them on their use of appropriate strategies. Using yours as a model, point out key features of summarising: opening and closing statements, main points in order, use of specific terms, and paraphrasing. Then show exactly how to reference the text. Ask students to bring a relevant idea or opinion they have read, explain it to the tutorial group, then reference it on the board. During discussion in tutorials ask students to acknowledge the sources of their ideas.

Assessment

Intensive teaching imposes a different time frame on assessment than semester-long teaching, but the principles are the same.

- Keep focused on the alignment of the learning objectives, class activities and the assessment tasks.
- Know exactly what you want your students to be able to demonstrate before designing your assessments.
- Be specific with your students about what you want.
- Assess frequently and briefly in order to see what your students understand and to give feedback in a number of forms: oral and written. You could try to make use of self- and peer- feedback.
- Be aware of the language you use in assessment tasks.
- Use short writing exercises at first and avoid long, open-ended essays.
- Use clear, transparent marking schemes.

Evaluation for quality teaching and learning

Quality means maintaining aims and learning objectives, even though the means of reaching them may differ in some offshore settings. La Trobe University policy requires conformity with the use of Student Unit Feedback Survey. You may also like to administer a Student Evaluation of Teaching Survey to evaluate your own teaching in the offshore environment.

General Information Before You Go

Set up support

In some cases you may find yourself completely on your own – it may take you a number of visits to establish local contacts. Before you go, find someone who has already been there to keep in touch with, preferably in your own faculty. Together anticipate what the potential challenges might be.

Respect

You are in a foreign country so be circumspect. You may readily be asked direct questions we regard as intrusive e.g. how old are you, why aren't you married, how much do you earn, where are you going? In many cultures, it is considered rude to be direct and say 'No', so listen and watch for alternatives like 'tomorrow', 'perhaps', and non-verbals – a smile but not a denial. Remain co-operative and calm even when you don't know what the rules are.

Offshore administrative regimes are different; they may not be clear to you or your students; expect the unexpected! Be firm about your deadlines, standards of attendance, turning off mobile phones, not smoking in class, and your academic expectations. If you feel unable to resolve an issue or that you have to make a compromise be guided by what is the essential issue. If in doubt, contact your support colleague. Keep your sense of humour!

Gift giving is a very important aspect of establishing relationships and may be more extravagant than we expect. Take small gifts such as La Trobe branded articles from the Image shop at Bundoora to give to key people.

Initial organisation and administration

- Seek administrative assistance from your faculty before, during and after offshore teaching e.g. insurance.
- Be familiar with your faculty's information for staff teaching offshore.
- Ensure you have a list of students or know who your in-country contact person is. It is often a good idea to email this person and establish personal contact before you go.
- Double-check your student enrolment information – correct class lists can be hard to get before you leave.
- Some offshore programs offer background information about the cohort of students for example, if the students are also included in other courses or internships. It is useful to have as much understanding as possible about the students and other responsibilities they have.
- Keep attendance records.

- Keep transparent records of all assessments.
- Be very clear about La Trobe University rules relating to enrolment, assessment, load, changing courses.
- Check out beforehand the appropriateness of local university accommodation before you accept it.
- Budget in a night after your teaching to recover before returning home.

Health

Check health warnings on the Department for Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) website

- Go to a travel doctor for updated requirements for immunisation.
- Ask your doctor to list all your medications for immigration checks.
- Take a first aid kit including antibiotics and medications for stomach pain, indigestion, diarrhoea; gastrolyte; betadine; ready-to-use gargle.
- Be prepared for minor infections such as gastroenteritis and colds.
- Be prepared for widespread smoking including in confined areas.
- Remember, standards of health and hygiene may be different from yours.
- Exercise regularly on the plane.

An Offshore Teaching Checklist

Before you go

- Ensure you are familiar with the LTU travel policy and procedure on the university website <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/finance/travel.html>
- Make sure you know faculty procedures.
- Make travel reservations.
- Ensure your passport is valid – cost borne by staff member.
- Make any visa application as per faculty procedure.
- Copy all important documents and place in a different bag from originals.
- Make your hotel reservation; better rates are often available by booking on the internet.
- Lodge University Travel Request Form – needs itinerary.

- Per diem request – needs itinerary.
- Know your travel insurance and take relevant documents with you.
- Ensure you have a travel diary – you will need to submit this on your return.
- Remember to change your mobile for international access.
- Remember cab charges to airport and back.
- Notify your supervisor and colleagues at La Trobe of missed meetings.
- Give supervisor a copy of itinerary and phone contact information.
- Put 'out of office' message on your email and phone.
- Notify host of arrival time, overall schedule, any special needs.
- Plan how materials will be prepared for students: do you need to send materials for host to produce?
- Before you leave La Trobe, confirm with host that the materials have arrived and been prepared.

While you're away – money

- Know how you will manage the local currency and payments.
- Keep all receipts, ticket stubs and boarding passes to substantiate your per diem.
- Airport departure tax needs to be paid in local currency – keep receipts.
- Per diem will cover meals and incidentals such as laundry.
- International ATM access is often available.
- Watch your credit card to prevent skimming.
- Keep a travel diary, listing expenses.

On your return

- Submit travel diary, receipts etc as per faculty procedure.
- Return unused cab charges.
- Report, as necessary.
- Debrief with colleagues/supervisors.

Website to help with offshore/transnational teaching:

University of South Australia <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/staff/resources/offshorepd.asp>

University of Tasmania <http://www.utas.edu.au/tl/transnational/index.html>