Engagement in the Classroom

A guide to facilitating equal participation amongst all student groups
Who are we?

We are a group of four student connectors and four members of staff from English Language for Academic Study (ELAS). The connector programme sees students and staff working as equal partners, learning, innovating and co-creating together to improve the student experience at Sussex.

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Why was our project commissioned?

Here at Sussex, international students comprise approximately 30 per cent of the student population. As student connectors, we have collective experiences of living, studying, and working in different countries. Consequently, we can resonate with and relate to many of the challenges that international students may face.

ELAS frequently receives feedback from students who say they would like to participate more in class.

Once a student has not participated for several weeks, there is a danger that they may become ‘invisible’ to more interactive students.

This can make becoming a ‘group member’ even more challenging.
How does our project align with the university's core values?

Collaboration

In accordance with the Sussex Access and Participation Plan, we sought to engage students as co-creators in their learning experience.

Inclusion

We worked with staff and students to identify facilitators and barriers to equal participation in group work and seminar discussion.

Integrity and Kindness

We sought the perspectives of staff and students from various academic and cultural backgrounds to develop culturally responsive teaching strategies.

Courage

This booklet aims to support staff in implementing inclusive teaching strategies that build students' confidence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents and Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction and about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents and structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the start of a module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the beginning of a module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When devising sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further resources (any underlined text will be listed as a resource on page 10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This activity enables students to get to know each other before they meet in person and maybe even find shared interests.

1. **Introductory email**

Consider emailing your new students to briefly introduce yourself and explain your role. You could ask, "Is there anything I can do to help you learn more effectively?"

Students who are new to the university may not have yet registered with the Student Support Unit (SSU). Consequently, this enables students to communicate any accessibility needs. For instance, "I have Dyslexia; please could any handouts be printed on yellow paper."

2. **Introductory slides**

Why not make a shared folder on OneDrive and encourage students to create a few slides about themselves? You could upload your own as an example.

The slides could contain images or clipart representing students' backgrounds and interests. For example, flags of countries they have lived in.

This activity enables students to get to know each other before they meet in person and maybe even find shared interests.

3. **Introductory activity**

Students are often tasked with exploring the reading list or Canvas page before starting a new module. However, why not task students with finding a journal article or book chapter that is of particular interest to them?

This could be used as an introductory activity in a future seminar session. In small groups, students could share their article and reason(s) for selecting it. For example, "An area of Geography I am particularly interested in is coral reef degradation in my home country of Malaysia, where I have witnessed its effects first-hand."
AT THE BEGINNING OF A MODULE

1. Break the ice

Students (and staff alike!) can often feel apprehensive before starting a new module. Consider assigning students to random seats. Temporarily disbanding any pre-existing groups may help to ensure that students who do not know anyone don't feel disadvantaged.

'Low-stakes' ice breakers may also help students to build a rapport whilst removing academic pressure. Check out this resource from the University of Birmingham for some great examples.

2. Share mutual expectations

As previously discussed, undergraduate and postgraduate students come to Sussex with various academic and cultural backgrounds. The first session is an excellent opportunity to explain any implicit assumptions. For instance, how should students address you in emails? What should they do if they wish to speak in a session? How do they access pre-session material (e.g. reading)?

The first session also provides an ideal opportunity to share mutual expectations. Whilst you may expect students to engage in certain learning behaviours, you could also let them know what they can expect from you as a tutor, e.g. responding to emails in 48 hours (when possible), when your office hours are etc.

3. Signpost support services

Regardless of where your module lies in the academic year, it's always helpful to remind students where they can access support:

- Student Centre for support with housing, jobs and careers, money and funding, health and wellbeing, visas and immigration, and disability support
- Skills Hub for academic support
- English Language for Academic Study (ELAS) for additional academic support for students for whom English is not their first language
WHEN DEVISING SESSIONS

1 Technology-enhanced learning

There are numerous websites and apps designed to promote student engagement. For instance, Talis Elevate enables staff to upload documents, videos, audio, and images for students to access remotely and in class. Students could anonymously discuss the required reading and post any questions before your session. This may help to provide more reticent students with a platform to share their ideas.

The Educational Enhancement website provides guidance and support for adopting and implementing technology-enhanced learning. Similarly, the Active Learning Network (established by several members of staff at the university) provides an online collaborative platform to showcase and discuss approaches to active learning across HE. The network recently published an open-access book, ‘100 Ideas for Active Learning’.

2 Dialogic teaching

"The ‘Thinking Together’ pedagogy developed by Alexander, Mercer, and Dawes in the early 1990s harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend thinking and advance learning and understanding. It ‘requires us to rethink not just the techniques we use but also the classroom relationships we foster, the balance of power between teacher and taught and the way we conceive of knowledge’ (Alexander, 2010)."

The above quote is from a blog post by Sue Robbins, a senior lecturer in the Department for Language Studies. Providing opportunities for classroom discussion is a fundamental component of dialogic teaching. However, staff frequently reported finding it challenging to facilitate equal participation in group discussions. Several students commented, "it’s always the same students that speak". Following our conversations with staff and students, we suggest that simple strategies such as randomising groups and assigning students with roles (e.g., facilitator, note taker) can help to mitigate these imbalances.

On a similar note, think-pair-share is a simple strategy where the whole group is given a single question or prompt to discuss. For a few minutes, students consider the question individually before forming pairs to discuss their responses. Finally, students are invited to share their thoughts with the wider group.
Gather feedback

Gathering student feedback is a valuable way to identify practices that are working well and practices that you may wish to consider adapting in future sessions. There are several student feedback mechanisms across the university, including the student rep scheme. Student reps attend termly school meetings and are asked to gather and share feedback with DoSEs. Why not ask your course rep to provide an anonymised summary of student feedback?

Furthermore, all students are strongly encouraged to complete mid-module evaluations. However, staff frequently reported that response rates were lower than desired. Students suggested that tutors could provide dedicated time during their teaching sessions for students to complete mid-module evaluations.

Discuss assessment(s)

As outlined in the Sussex Access and Participation Plan, there is a national and institutional attainment gap between ethnic minority and White British students. Assessments typically occur at the end of a module once in-person teaching has finished. Therefore, it's important to support students' preparation throughout the course of the term.

As previously discussed, undergraduate and postgraduate students come from a wide range of academic and cultural backgrounds. We may assume that postgraduate students are competent academic writers; however, assessment practices differ between countries and institutions. Critical reading and writing were one of the most common concerns identified by students.

Reading and writing critically require different skills compared to memorising and repeating information from a textbook. Similarly, students may come from a culture where criticality is not encouraged and is thus an unfamiliar concept.

You could do a step-by-step tutorial of how you would approach critically reading a journal article. Or you could provide examples of essays from previous years and encourage students to unpick the structure. You could also encourage students to form study groups with their peers. Finally, don't forget to signpost students to Skills Hub and ELAS for further support.
Neurodivergence

'Neurodiversity is a viewpoint that brain differences are normal, rather than deficits. Neurodivergent people (such as those with ADHD, autism, and learning disabilities) experience, interact with, and interpret the world in unique ways. Whilst this can sometimes create challenges, it can also lead to creative problem-solving and new ideas — things that benefit everyone.'

At the start of your module, try to gather students’ perspectives on what support they may need to make learning accessible (further outlined on page 4). Whilst it’s important to gain students’ first-hand perspectives, your class register will also highlight students registered with the Student Support Unit that may have ‘tutor consideration’ documents.

One student remarked, “Recognising differences in learning can make the difference between choosing to do that [subject] as a career and deciding that you never want to do that subject again.”

Cultural differences

This section is written by Natalie Li, an MA English Language Teaching student from Hong Kong.

When international students first set foot in a UK university, not only must they commit to keeping pace with their studies, but they also are confronted with a new and distinct culture and community which requires time and skills to acculturate to.

In some countries, such as Japan and China, there is a high power distance between teachers and students. This may contribute to a false perception of inequality where students perceive themselves as 'below' their teachers. Consequently, international students may fear questioning their teachers and/or sharing their honest opinions.

I believe that all of the strategies suggested in this booklet can help ameliorate these power imbalances. Nonetheless, it’s also important to be patient. In our focus groups, students reflected that they wanted to be involved more. However, as previously mentioned, it takes time to acculturate to a new community and culture. That's why building an inclusive classroom culture is so important.
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We would like to thank all of the students and staff who contributed to this project. We hope that you find this booklet useful.

If you would like to find out further information about:

The Connector Programme

English Language for Academic Study (ELAS)
http://www.sussex.ac.uk/languages/english/elas
Page 1 - Student population statistics:
https://www.sussex.ac.uk/about/facts/facts-figures

Page 2 - Sussex Access and Participation Plan:
https://www.sussex.ac.uk/study/terms-and-conditions/access-agreements

Page 5 - 'Low-stakes' icebreakers:
https://conferences.bham.ac.uk/2018/03/01/10-icebreakers-for-your-conference/

Page 5 - Student Centre:
https://student.sussex.ac.uk/centre/

Page 5 - Skills Hub:
https://www.sussex.ac.uk/skills-hub/

Page 6 - Talis Elevate:

Page 6 - Educational Enhancement:
https://staff.sussex.ac.uk/teaching/enhancement/support

Page 6 - Active Learning Network:
https://activelearningnetwork.com/

Page 6 - 100 Ideas for Active Learning
https://openpress.sussex.ac.uk/ideasforactivelearning/

Page 6 - Dialogic teaching:
https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/mah/2022/01/13/dialogicteaching/

Page 6 - Think pair share:
https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/activelearning/2019/05/01/think-pair-share/

Page 7 - Student reps:
https://www.sussex.ac.uk/adqe/enhancement/studentengagement/studentreps

Page 8 - Neurodiversity:
https://www.understood.org/en/articles/neurodiversity-what-you-need-to-know