

PLANNING CONTACT COURSES

Contact courses can be an especially rewarding form of teaching. Students who attend these courses are frequently highly motivated, and the extended contact time gives you space to engage meaningfully with them, and to reflect on and explore the core values of your discipline. Successful contact courses can be as energising for you as for the students.

Designing a contact course is a process of making decisions about *what* and *how* to teach.

Clarify the purpose of the course:

- ▼ Why are the students coming and what will they need? Is the course compulsory or voluntary? Time spent considering students' motivation and needs will gain buy-in and enable you to prioritise the content.
- ▼ What will students gain from the face to face time that they could not gain online, in Stream or through other course materials? Will they:
 - mainly get to know one another and you, and learn the "culture" of your discipline?
 - be exposed to new material or mainly consolidate familiar material?
 - create new understanding by interacting with one another?
 - have opportunities to interact with guest experts?
 - mainly prepare for or undertake assessments?

Consider the participants in the course:

- ▼ Ensure that lecturer and student expectations of the course match. Remember that students will already have read information about the contact course in the study guide which they received before the semester began. (Although you may want to add more detailed information on the course Stream site.) Shared expectations will facilitate a smooth transition into learning this way.
- ▼ What level are your students? Do you need to consider integrating support from the library and learning consultants into your schedule?
- ▼ Before the contact course begins, consider adding a video clip to your course Stream site in which you introduce yourself in order to establish the relationship.
- ▼ What are the needs of students coming from a distance? Providing maps of the campus and city, and information about transport, parking and places to eat on and around campus can help to reduce stress for students.
- ▼ Consider planning a voluntary evening social event to encourage the development of student peer groups.
- ▼ Provide students with a course timetable before you start, and avoid unnecessary variations in the schedule. Where student needs dictate changes in the programme, make sure you consult with the students in your contact course before changing the schedule.

Create the structure of the course:

- ▼ Plan the meals and breaks and calculate how much actual learning time there is after meals, breaks, etc.
- ▼ Consider how you will re-establish engagement after breaks, and identify strategies to manage traditional problem periods, such as immediately after lunch and late afternoon.
- ▼ Invite guest lecturers and create a mix of delivery methods and classroom activities so that you and the students remain energised, not exhausted. Ensure that you have considered the limits and possibilities of the space you will be teaching in:
 - Will it be easy to move around the room, or change the layout?
 - What resources and equipment will be available to you?
 - How will the space limit or enhance potential teaching and learning activities?

Create the content of the course:

Because your time together is limited, the content you cover must be carefully selected and structured for students' maximum benefit:

- ▼ Consider whether the course is a voluntary or compulsory course. Voluntary courses should not contain core material or assessments as this penalises those students who do not attend.
- ▼ Use your knowledge of the course's participants, purpose, time and space to prioritise the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will be most useful for students to acquire by the end of the course. Ensure that the content you include matches the needs you and your students identified earlier.
- ▼ Formulate this content into measurable learning outcomes and/or assessment tasks that are achievable in the time available.
- ▼ Be aware of the common problem of too much *what* for the *when*. A contact course is best used as an opportunity to practise skills and develop critical thinking and problem solving, rather than as an opportunity to deliver content (which can be done just as effectively online or in the study guide). Aim for depth of understanding rather than breadth of knowledge.

Engaging students lies at the heart of the vision for how teaching and learning takes place at Massey University:

Massey University is committed to ensuring an exceptional and distinctive learning experience for all students, characterised by providing applied, real-world, problem-solving learning opportunities. *Road to 2020 (2011)*

Need more help with your contact course?

Contact a teaching consultant at your local Centre for Teaching and Learning:

Further Reading

Biggs, J., & Tang, C., (2007). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (3rd ed.) NY: Open University Press.

Hunt, L., & Chalmers, D. (Eds.). (2012). *University teaching in focus: A learning-centred approach*. Victoria, Australia: Acer Press.