

# Historical Insights

Focus on Teaching



## TEACHING AS A PhD STUDENT

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Historical Insights: Focus on Teaching  
Teaching as a PhD Student

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# Introduction

It is increasingly common for PhD students to teach on top of undertaking research. This work has a number of purposes for students and universities alike. On the most basic level, it enables universities to cover their teaching responsibilities while PhD students can use the money towards fees and living costs. Yet teaching enables PhD students to develop a range of transferable skills while building up vital work experience should they decide to follow a career in academia. Teaching can also help PhD students to learn how to communicate their research findings clearly to a range of different audiences, as well as drawing out the broader contexts of their topic. However, it is still additional work on top of the already heavy demands of a PhD. It is essential that PhD students are aware of the responsibilities as well as the advantages of teaching during their studies, and that they are able to balance teaching and research effectively.

The degree of preparation and training that PhD students are given for their first teaching jobs varies from institution to institution, as do opportunities for teaching. While many students are able to benefit from postgraduate certificates in teaching, validated by the Higher Education Academy, it is not unusual for students to be given teaching work without any formal training or support in place. Those who are working on a PGCHE or similar course may find that they are working alongside students and probationary lecturers from a range of disciplines, and would welcome more disciplinary discussion. This booklet is aimed at those early career researchers who are teaching for the first time.

# Practicalities

Although it is often expected that PhD students will teach during their doctoral studies, it doesn't follow that all find posts in their own institutions or that they will teach on their research. It is perfectly acceptable to teach after you finish your PhD – the point is to gain some experience at some point, and to use that as a foundation for building up a range of experiences. Teaching as a PhD student is about getting to grips with the essentials of teaching, from learning how to run a successful seminar to marking for the first time; from dealing with minor course administration and learning how departments run to discovering the basics of theories of learning. Once you are comfortable with the basics, it is important to start developing your repertoire – teaching at different levels, on specialised modules, perhaps in different institutions. And it is also important to keep reflecting on your practice, as well as talking to people in your own and other disciplines about how they teach.

For all its advantages, teaching as a PhD student comes with a health warning. Teaching is a very time-consuming activity, and it can impact upon your ability to complete your research and writing up. You will need to prepare lectures and

seminars, and may well be asked to mark essays and coursework or hold office hours with students. There will also be a degree of administrative work, from filling out assessment report forms to the responsibilities that come with convening courses when you are more experienced. If you live at a distance from your campus or are working at another institution, you may also find that you lose a few hours through commuting – despite laptops and wireless technology, it's not always possible to be sharp and productive through every train journey!

For some people, having to give up time to teaching helps them to focus on their research on other days; for others, it can be easy to waste time in over-preparing. You should also think honestly about your workload and your approach to managing your time: how will teaching affect your workload and your lifestyle? These are important decisions to make before you start teaching, or before you commit to a future workload. Think about the financial implications in both the short and the long term – is it possible that teaching might hold up completion of your thesis beyond your scholarship, or will it help keep you afloat financially as you finish? These are important questions for you to ask of yourself – and there are no set answers. Use your own judgement, and don't listen to scare stories. You are the best judge of your time, commitments and abilities. Don't be afraid to ask people at all different stages in their careers about their experiences of teaching. It can be helpful to have an idea of the range of possibilities, and to think about what situations might be similar to your own.



## Finding teaching experience and work

Hourly-paid, part-time teaching in universities tends to be advertised on an ad hoc basis. PhD students may be offered work by their PhD supervisors or other members of staff, or find work through a variety of informal networks. If you are interested in teaching, the first step to take is to make your supervisor aware of this. He or she may not be able to offer teaching, but they could know of colleagues within the university or elsewhere who are looking for teaching assistance. The networks that you participate in may also yield occasional vacancies. Various emailing lists – such as those of the History Lab, Institute of Historical Research seminars, the learned societies and specialist networks – may post details of vacancies to their members as they arise. The Institute of Historical Research website also carries such vacancies on an occasional basis. Job websites – such as [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk) – sometimes advertise opportunities for part-time teaching, so it can be worth signing up to these sites for a weekly alert, as these emails also provide links to careers advice articles. Some institutions also advertise annually for staff to teach on part-time evening and/or distance learning courses: the Open University, Birkbeck and the Workers' Educational Association, for example. If you do not have any teaching experience in higher or any other educational sector to put on your CV, then think about building up your experience in related activities. This could include outreach work with schools, mentoring, running seminars, and working in student support, to name but a few.

## Preparing to teach for the first time

So you have found yourself a teaching post – how do you go about preparing yourself for teaching? The first time you find yourself at the front of the classroom is a daunting experience. You are acutely aware of the eyes trained on you; you worry about whether or not the students will find you boring, or perhaps if one will ask you a question you cannot answer. These are normal fears. While giving a seminar presentation comes with similar anxieties, you are speaking on a topic that you should know inside out. This is not always the case with teaching, where you could well be teaching on a subject that is brand new to you or you haven't studied since you were an undergraduate yourself. The trick is to not be intimidated by the sea of faces by being confident in your preparation and remembering a few key points. It is important to remember that it takes time to settle into teaching, to feel comfortable in front of the room and to be confident in dealing with the various situations you can find yourself in.

The best starting point for thinking about the teaching style you want to develop is to think about a past teacher who really inspired you. What did they teach you? How did they make their subject interesting? How did they help you build up your

confidence in yourself? Although this differs from case to case, there tend to be certain characteristics that these teachers share. They are usually knowledgeable and passionate about their subjects, and are able to get other people fascinated and excited about them. They are often friendly and approachable, and also explain things clearly. In other words, they make it easy for other people to see why their subject is worth paying attention to. Think carefully about these qualities and how you could incorporate them into your own teaching practice. It is not as difficult as you think. Did they do anything in a different way to other teachers? What from their techniques can you incorporate into your own teaching? Often, simply enjoying your subject is the best resource you have when starting your career as a teacher in higher education. Reflect upon what it is that you enjoy now, and what you did/did not enjoy when you were at the same stage as your students. Why was this? Your specialist knowledge of your field is your basis for teaching, but thinking about how you learn and how you can make your subject interesting is the key to teaching effectively.

## The mechanics of teaching

The first step of the mechanics of teaching is preparation. General preparation is straightforward – make sure you have copies of or have read the majority of books on the course. Plan this in good time. Aim to do as little new course reading in the middle of term as possible. Although it may feel as though you are doing far more reading than your students will, it is very important to have the information fresh in your mind. Setting aside a couple of weeks to work on the reading also means that you are not going to be swamped with reading when you should be writing up chapters or researching in archives. PhD students often find themselves teaching on modules at quite a remove from their research topics, and it is all too easy to panic about how much you don't know about your subject. It is vital to remember that it is not your job to know absolutely everything about the week's topic – but it is your job to be able to facilitate your students' learning. Thus your efforts should be directed towards familiarising yourself with the key material – the key events and factors, schools of thought, controversies etc – rather than trying to 'learn' it all. The following section will look at methods of preparing yourself for teaching, before looking in closer depth at techniques for lecturing and seminar teaching.

### Stage one – preparing for the course

Familiarise yourself with the curriculum as early as you can. Look not only at the timetable and reading list, but for aims/outcomes of the course as a whole.

- Research or re-read the materials you will need for teaching as soon as possible, so that you will not be competing with students for library books and other resources.



- Before you begin to plan individual sessions, plot out your own perspectives and thoughts on:
  - The general themes of the course
  - Specific topics
  - Issues and debates
- Also consider...
  - Location of materials – could your students easily access primary sources, for example?
  - What online resources are they able to access?
  - Opportunities – exhibitions, television programmes, government reports etc – add-on activities that your students could participate in to develop their interests and knowledge.

## Stage two – preparing for your first class

Whether giving a lecture or running a seminar class, teaching for the first time can be nerve-wracking. But there are a number of things that you can do to help yourself feel and seem more confident:

- Think about your posture – stand straight, putting your shoulders back.
- Think about your clothes – aim for a compromise between what you feel comfortable in and what fits with the dress code of the department. Wearing smarter clothes can often help you feel more confident and authoritative.
- Think about your voice – how do you best project your voice? Do you feel better standing up or sitting down?
- Do you have any habits? Think about if you fiddle with your hair, nails, glasses etc and think about how you can stop doing it!

It might be useful to film yourself speaking (if you can handle it!) and be watchful for ways in which you can change your presentation. Some universities require new teachers to be observed – this can be a good way to get feedback, or you could ask a friend to listen to a dummy lecture.

Although it is vital to think about your physical bearing, don't forget to think about what it is that you have to say!

- Are there any words or phrases that you overuse?

- Think about the terms you use. Do you slip into jargon without explaining what the terms are? Don't assume that students are familiar with technical terms – or that they understand them correctly.
- Do you ask open or closed questions? Do you ask questions that require a 'right' answer? Is there room for students to give ball-park answers?
- Openness is important. It's not a question of spoon-feeding: students are keen to know how they can do well and to be able to judge their performance. Be open about what you want from them and about your methods – they will respect it.

The first session you teach is crucial. Use it as a time to find out information about your group and to give them information about you and the course. Always begin your first seminar session with everyone introducing him or herself. This is very important in helping you to remember everyone's names, but it also helps the group to bond.

- Ask each group member to say a little more about themselves.
- Consider using ice-breaker techniques, if you will have time (and space).
- Give some information about yourself – talk about your PhD (briefly!), what other things you have done, why you are teaching the course.
- Be clear about the course and what it entails – give the students plenty of opportunity to ask questions about it. If you don't know the answer to a question, find out promptly and then get back to them. Do encourage your students to bring their module guides with them to each class, even if this information is also available on the virtual learning environment (VLE).
- Take your group's email addresses separately to any lists stored on the VLE – be very clear that you are taking the addresses in order to email them about course matters. It is best to insist on asking for university email addresses rather than trying to keep up with personal email accounts. It is also worth reminding students to include their names in each email, especially if your university does not give undergraduates named email addresses!
- Take time after the first session to think about the answers you receive. Information you receive casually in the first session can be used as a starting point for reaching your students more effectively or for pre-empting later problems. For example, knowing that most of your students also take English means that you can ask them to relate their knowledge from that subject to yours. It also means that you can be aware that they may have less of a background in writing historical essays or need additional support in performing well in two disciplines.



- Invite students to see you afterwards or to email you if they would like you to know about any special needs they have and what you can do to help them. Also discuss this with your module convenor. Be prepared to find out more about any conditions, and think about what you can do to make things easier for them. VLEs mean that students can access lecture notes beforehand in some cases, and can use them as a guide for note-taking; MP3 and digital voice recorders can be of immense help to students with learning difficulties.

There are also a few points of practical advice that you should bear in mind:

- Always check out the room before you teach in there for the first time. Don't wait for your first class to discover that you can't log into the computers for AV or that you don't know how to use a particular piece of equipment! Be aware of what facilities you have at your disposal.
- University facilities should all be compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (2005), but do look out for and flag to the module convenor any issues with access to the room or problems with equipment such as hearing loops as part of your room check.
- If you are writing on the board and talking at the same time, remember to talk into the room, not into the board!
- Avoid using green and red at the same time when using board markers or in PowerPoint presentations as any colour-blind students may be unable to differentiate between the two.

- If you are using AV as part of your teaching, remember to keep each PowerPoint slide/OHP as simple as possible. Never use a font smaller than 18pt on PowerPoint. For lecture halls, 24pt is usually the best size.
- With all slides, keep your bullet points to the bare minimum. You need to just put the key terms up on the slides. Any more than this and your audience will be trying to keep up with copying the slides rather than listening to you.

## Stage three – individual lesson planning

Look back on the notes you took originally, and use these as a basis for your lessons, looking carefully at the learning aims and outcomes for the module. Also look at what you learned about your group in the first class and consider how to use that information

- How much time do you have? Remember that bits of housekeeping and answering questions can all take up time.
- Always establish your aims and outcomes first. Simply put, that's what are you going to do, and what do you want the students to learn?
- Having established this, you can begin to plan the structure of the session.
- In terms of activities, you can use the general course aims and outcomes for inspiration.
- Produce a plan for yourself which includes:
  - The aims and outcomes
  - A plan of activities, including resources needed and approximate running times
- Don't forget to include time to round up – summarise what has been learned and point out how it will relate to the next class.

## Stage four – evaluating lessons

Take time to reflect upon how each session went. Think about what your students responded to. It is OK to have activities or sessions that don't go so well, as long as you think about what you might do differently next time. Don't forget that there are also more formal means of evaluating your teaching – which could come from having a colleague observe you or from the standard end of year evaluation forms used by university departments.

# Teaching in practice: running successful seminars

Seminars provide many opportunities for creative teaching, and in many ways you are bounded only by the resources you have to hand. Here are some examples of purposeful activities that can be used in seminar teaching. Don't forget to reinforce activities by scribing the key points made in the course of the exercises on the board as well as by rounding up what has been learned in each exercise.

**Close analysis:** put the group into pairs/small groups, asking them to analyse a primary source. Each group then presents their analysis to the group. Using a range of sources with groups allows for more ground to be covered and opens up discussion. Exercises like this build up skills in primary source analysis as well as building up confidence in speaking to a room of people. It is acceptable to allow up to 10 minutes for students to read documentary sources or to consider visual sources in a seminar. With longer documentary sources, it is often better to provide these in advance, either releasing them in good time via the VLE or providing hand-outs at the end of class for the following week. Close analysis techniques can also work well with secondary sources, especially where the objective is to explore debates in historiography and method. Although short extracts can be given to read in class, it is usually advisable to set these exercises in advance, and to expect undergraduate students to read no more than a standard-length journal article or similar length portion of a book as the basic unit of analysis.

**Debates:** split the group into two. Ask each group to work on one side of a particular argument or issue. They should develop their 'case' in order to present it to the group. This can be done as a straightforward 'report back' exercise, or in a more formal debating style. This exercise helps to build up confidence in identifying the key elements of particular arguments and of thinking critically about viewpoints the students may not have previously considered or agree with. The exercise should be concluded with a summing up by the seminar leader, pulling together the two sides of the argument and reflecting on progress towards the learning objectives of thinking through arguments and different viewpoints.

**Mind-mapping:** divide the class into groups, and ask them to create a mind-map (spider diagrams). Supply each group with large pieces of paper – flip chart paper is ideal – and coloured pens. Suitable topics for mind-maps include plans for essay questions, revising a topic, identifying the key points of a school of thought or thinking through an issue from a contemporary's point of view. Although the exercise can be light-hearted and creative, it engages visual learning preferences and encourages students to arrange their thoughts on the subject in a different way. Students can hold up the posters or stick them to the board as part of the process of feeding back to



the group. Activities along these lines support the development of skills in selecting and organising information, as well as communicating this in an appropriate and clear fashion.

**Presentations:** giving a presentation can encourage students to read widely and critically for each class. It can develop skills in research as well as building confidence in presentation skills. A presentation may be formal and assessed using slides/ PowerPoint, or can be a more informal talk-through of the subject. Students can be nervous about doing presentations, assessed or not. Support and encourage positive participation by thanking students for their work, and setting up a class discussion by summing up some of the key themes presented and asking the group to respond to them.

**Role play:** students are asked to think about a particular event or situation from the point of view of an historical actor. This could take the format of a small group discussion, perhaps realised as a mind-map presented to the whole group, or more adventurously, students could be asked to report back in character! As with mind-mapping, this is a more creative way of exploring historical issues and concerns, and can be used in conjunction with primary source study.

**Mock elections:** mock elections work particularly well with topics in political history, especially where students are asked to consider their options from the point of view of an individual or an interest group – it can be related to role play exercises, as above. In one example, students are put into small groups to mind-map a particular party view, before presenting their pitch to the whole group; after all groups have

presented, students individually complete ballot forms, which are then returned to the seminar leader for the count. The results of the 'election' can then be discussed. The technique can be adapted to cover social history topics. As with debates, these exercises test skills in assessing information and collating arguments.

**Quizzes:** these can be a simple and effective means of informally assessing learning to date, as well as thinking about the ways in which essay and exam questions are framed. The quiz can be set by the seminar leader, or the students can generate questions themselves. Quizzes can be used to test factual learning, but also get students thinking about the key points of their topics and the mechanics of asking – and answering – questions. VLEs can also be used to set quizzes – the answers can be given and discussed in class.

**Creating questions:** a similar exercise to setting quizzes centres upon getting the students to set their own questions. This is useful in classes which result in examinations, as it sets up student revision by encouraging them to think about the parameters of particular topics and the ways in which questions are phrased. It can be a useful means of exploring what is wanted in questions, by thinking through the keywords and phrases used in building questions.

## Frequently asked questions – seminars

### What if my group won't talk in seminar activities?

Think carefully about why it is that your group may be reluctant to speak. Common reasons for this include student anxieties about a body of knowledge that is new or perceived to be 'hard' and shyness. It can also be linked to a particularly vociferous student who dominates discussion or can be the result of setting inappropriate seminar activities.

Students who are new to a particular topic are usually (and understandably) reluctant to discuss it in class in front of others. One of the best ways to get them speaking is to build up their confidence through using small group teaching techniques. Divide the seminar group into pairs to discuss a different source or issue. These pairs can then either report on their source or question to the whole group or a pyramid structure can be used. In a pyramid structure, two pairs join to report to each other on their original sources/questions. Typical exercises at this stage can include comparing the two sources or working on a fresh question that builds upon the original two topics. These larger groups are then merged with other groups following this pattern, to whichever stage you would like to end the exercise. The key to successful small group work is to set each group a different question. This means that class members remain

engaged, actively listening and learning during feedback from other groups, as well as improving their confidence in speaking in the group. It is also a good idea to insist that people work in different small groups each week. This breaks up cliques that may form and can also prevent individuals from getting into a pattern of dominating quieter or shyer members of the class. Keep an eye on who ends up reporting back each week, and make sure that everyone gets a turn – going round each group to discuss progress helps you to keep everyone on track and also gives you an opportunity to check that there will be a fresh *rapporteur* for each group.

## How do I draw out quieter members of the class or keep dominant ones in check?

These are two sides of the same coin. Even if you scrupulously manage your class so that all get a chance to speak, there can still be issues with individuals who are shy or dominant. Dominant individuals can be contained through careful monitoring of small group work, but also through policing group discussions. If people interrupt others, politely point out that another person was speaking, and that you will come back to them in turn. This should not discourage the more confident from speaking, but highlights to the less confident that you are also interested in what they have to contribute. However, be careful when directly asking less confident students to answer a question. It is often better to develop their confidence through small group exercises and to ask them if they have an answer if it looks as though they are building up to having a go at answering.

## What if people don't behave?

If you clearly set out your expectations during the first class you teach, then students have a foundation to work with. Common rules include turning off mobile phones, arriving for class on time, having done the necessary preparation, not eating/chewing gum in class, respecting the views of other people and not interrupting others. Other policies may relate to such issues as restrictions on drinks that can be brought into classrooms, not arriving in class after a certain time, and reporting frequent absence. Lay out your expectations and stick to them. Don't be afraid to pull people up on inappropriate behaviour, especially where it impacts on the learning of others. The key is to be assertive as well as fair and respectful. If problems develop, speak to the module convenor or the appropriate member of staff within the department.



## Teaching in practice: giving a lecture

Giving lectures is in many ways an easier task than running a seminar, although PhD students are usually expected to have a background in running seminars before they are given lectures to present. A seminar requires a lot of effort and planning in order to keep a discussion going in a productive fashion. Although a lecturer needs to engage the audience, the activity does not require too much action from the audience. Lectures have been criticised for being a passive learning technique, yet they remain a major form of delivering material as a large number of students can access the same information.

A first lecture is a daunting task, not least in terms of thinking about what you need to prepare. First-time lecturers tend to feel that they need to write out a lecture that is delivered in a similar style to a seminar or conference paper. However, this method does not work well, as it is all too easy to read the notes too quickly without looking at your audience, or to overload the students with too much detail. An undergraduate lecture is a starting point for deeper study. It may provide an overview of a topic – such as outlining the key points in British politics in the 1970s – or present a particular historiographical debate about the subject. It may, along the way, pose questions for further consideration in the seminar. What it does not do is cover the topic in minute detail. Don't forget that the point of a lecture – and indeed a seminar – is to facilitate the learning of your students. University students are ultimately independent, adult learners for whom classes are a space for collaborative exploration of key subjects. Thus your role is to provide overarching frameworks and stimulation for this discussion.

It can be tempting to think that a lecture on the Great Reform Act of 1832 must include as much information as a journal article. Not so. The key to preparing a successful lecture is to think about your audience, and what it is they need to know by the end of the class. You may have around five points of knowledge. Our worked example of the Great Reform Act ran thus:

- The progress of the Bill through the Commons and Lords.
- Key issues around the Bill – the attitudes of the Whigs and Tories; the function of the 1831 general election; the influence of public opinion on parliamentary attitudes to the passage of the Bill; and its actual results.
- A case study of the Bristol Riots in October 1831.
- Historiographical debate about the Great Reform Act and its impact.

These four points provide ample scope for a lecture on the Great Reform Act (this one was pitched to third year undergraduates doing a special subject on it). These four points can then be converted into four learning objectives. Factual information –

the passage of the Bill, the Bristol Riots – is interspersed with conceptual matter. This changes the pace of the lecture, so that students move from clarifying the processes of the Act and its passage through to considering its broader impacts, to thinking about a specific case study, before drawing it all together with the historiography. There is a natural progression of the lecture.

Rather than writing out a lecture in full, it is always much better to use some form of notes. This could be a sheet of bullet-pointed notes; or it could be a series of index cards; or a PowerPoint presentation. Using notes rather than reading allows you to look at your audience and use their responses in order to moderate your performance. You may need to clarify a particular point, or move on to a more complex area of the subject. You may also wish to engage them by asking them questions or getting their reflections on the subject. If you are focused on them, then this is an easier task. It is not as difficult as you may think, and it is always worth practising beforehand. Remember, you don't need to recall an entire lecture-length essay, but you need to be able to talk engagingly about your subject, highlighting the key points. This method makes it easier to capitalise on the use of slides etc, as you are not fixed to getting through a set amount of text. A dab of serendipity in teaching is an important thing – sometimes the offhand comment a student makes or half-formed, tentative observation – can set up an important discussion.

Remember that adults can only concentrate in 20-minute bursts, so keep your lectures lively by using PowerPoint or other AV equipment to display quotations and images that you want to consider; you could perhaps use Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube to show film clips. If you feel comfortable with it, ask questions to the



room. You should also begin the lecture with a statement of the learning aims/objectives and outcomes, as well as outlining the course of the lecture and linking it to previous learning; you should conclude by summarising the learning, presenting a view or a question for further consideration, and relating to how the class prepares students for the next one.

Practical tips to bear in mind include: the advice given earlier on not crowding slides and thinking about how legible text is; practising keeping to time (it is bad form to finish late and thus delay the following lecturer); testing out film clips and other technical aspects before class.

## Conclusion

Teaching as a PhD student is a very rewarding experience. It can be incredibly enjoyable to spend time talking about the subjects that you are passionate about – and be paid for it. Although building up a portfolio of teaching experience will help your entry into an academic career, there is much personal satisfaction to be had from rising to the challenge of delivering a successful class and watching your students develop as learners.

## Mini-glossary

**Convenor.** The person who is ultimately responsible for the running of a module or degree programme.

**Double marking.** Assessed pieces of work are marked independently by two assessors, who then compare marks and agree a final mark. Blind double-marking is a version of this, where the markers take care not to see or discuss each other's comments until meeting.

**Formative assessment.** Assessments that form part of ongoing teaching. These may not count towards the final mark for a module, but are used as a means of giving feedback and developing student performance.

**Moderation.** The process of taking a sample of essays from a set of coursework to assess how consistent and fair the marking is. Sampling usually includes all firsts and fails, and a proportional sample of 2:1, 2:2 and third class degrees, although practice varies.

**Quality assurance.** The process of maintaining academic standards in higher education institutions. Includes ensuring that all degree programmes meet disciplinary 'benchmarks', and that modules provide sufficient intellectual rigour and appropriate assessment patterns.

**Quality Assurance Agency.** The regulatory body for standards in higher education.

**Sessional lecturers.** Similar to VLS. The title refers to their employment being linked to each academic session.

**Summative assessment.** Assessments that decide a student's final grade, such as final exams, dissertations etc.

**Teaching assistant (TA).** Usually a postgraduate, typical duties include running seminar sessions, marking essays and possibly some oral presentations – often formative rather than summative coursework. TAs may also present lectures under guidance from their module convenor, and may also hold office hours.

**Temporary lecturer.** Usually a postdoctoral appointment, often lasting nine months to a year. These posts are full-time, often to cover research leave by senior staff, and are similar in scope to permanent lectureships.

**Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).** Virtual learning environments are intranets used in teaching. These can be used for storing lecture notes and course materials, but they also have some very useful additional functions for online learning – such as opportunities for chat, creating wikis and blogs. The main types of VLE are Moodle and WebCT, although some universities use bespoke VLEs. A similar kind of tool is the Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) program, which enables students

to build up a portfolio. This is usually applied to personal and careers planning, but can be particularly useful for modules which use a lot of visual and online materials. One of the main programs in this area is PebblePAD.

**Visiting Lecturer (VL).** Can be postgraduate or postdoctoral; they often have more responsibilities than teaching assistants, which could include setting and marking assessed coursework. They may be required to sit on examination boards. 'Visiting' refers to their status as temporary lecturers on fractional contracts or hourly pay.

# Further reading and explorations

## Learning theory

Although it is by no means essential to have read all the learning theories out there before starting teaching (in fact having some experience may make it easier to engage with the theories), it is useful to have an idea of the basic concepts.

**VARK** is a programme based on the notion that there are four distinct learning preferences or strategies used by people: Visual, Aural, Read-Write and Kinaesthetic. VARK is particularly useful with adult learners because it easily makes sense of the ways in which people prefer to learn and can suggest different techniques for use in class or in revision. See [www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=introduction](http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=introduction) for full details, an online test, FAQs, downloadable resources and more information.

**Kolb's experiential learning** is another, related theory that is useful in understanding how adults acquire, assimilate and process information ([www.businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm](http://www.businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm)).

**Bloom's taxonomy** explores the processes by which humans build upon their learning, by progressing through a variety of stages ([www.businessballs.com/bloomstaxonomyoflearningdomains.htm](http://www.businessballs.com/bloomstaxonomyoflearningdomains.htm)).

**Deep and surface learning** is about how you get your students to go from having a general idea about a topic (factual recall) to having a deeper knowledge (applying their factual knowledge in the construction of a complex argument). A good article on this can be found at [www.engsc.ac.uk/er/theory/learning.asp](http://www.engsc.ac.uk/er/theory/learning.asp).

Want to know more? Check out your university library (if PGCEs are offered, there will be books on the subject). Bournemouth University have a good webpage with links to articles: [www.bournemouth.ac.uk/eds/learning\\_and\\_teaching/theories.htm](http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/eds/learning_and_teaching/theories.htm).



History at the Higher Education Academy works towards the development of teaching and learning of history in Higher Education – reviewing current practices, discussing disciplinary research and innovations, and examining issues of strategic importance.

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