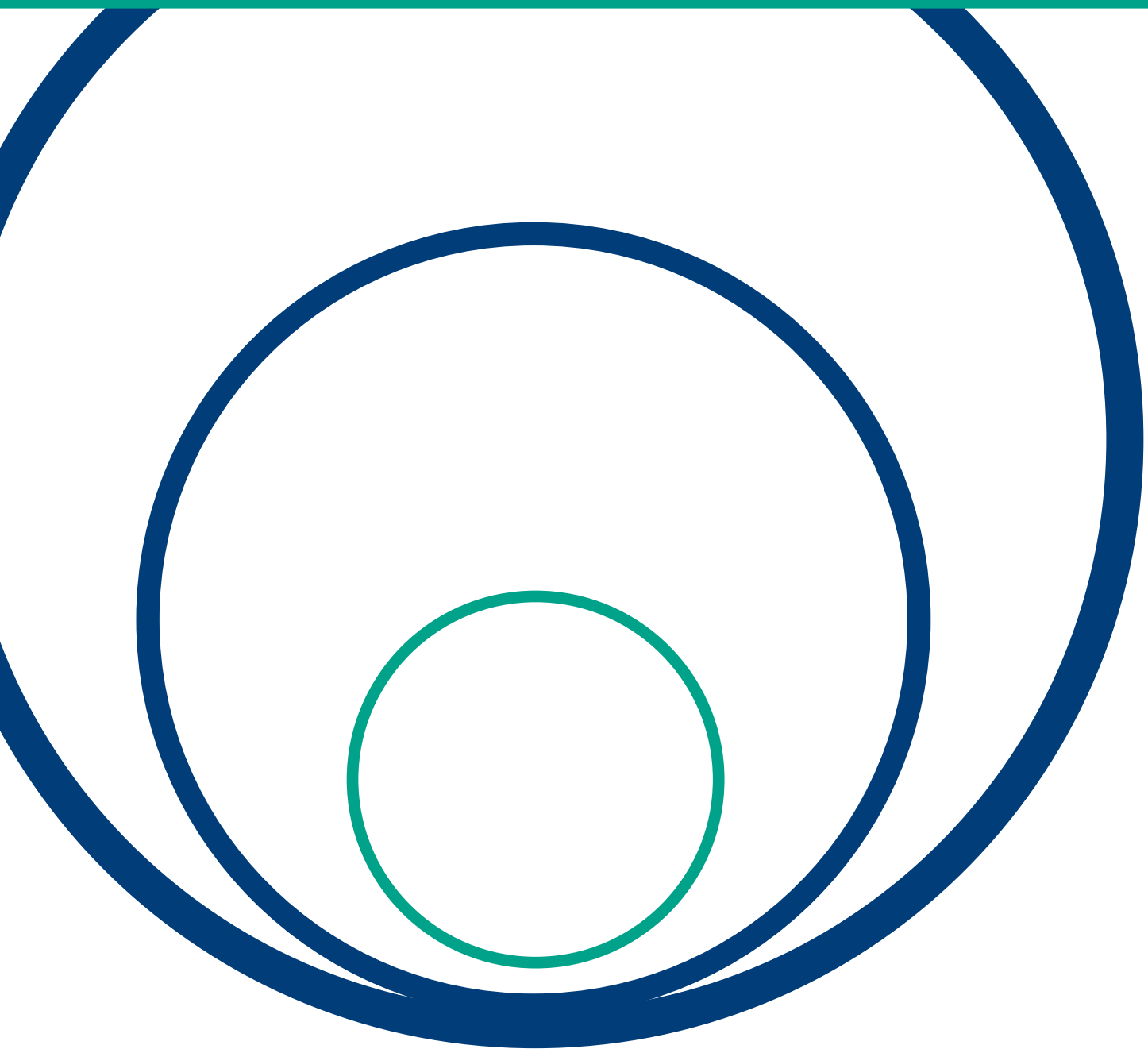
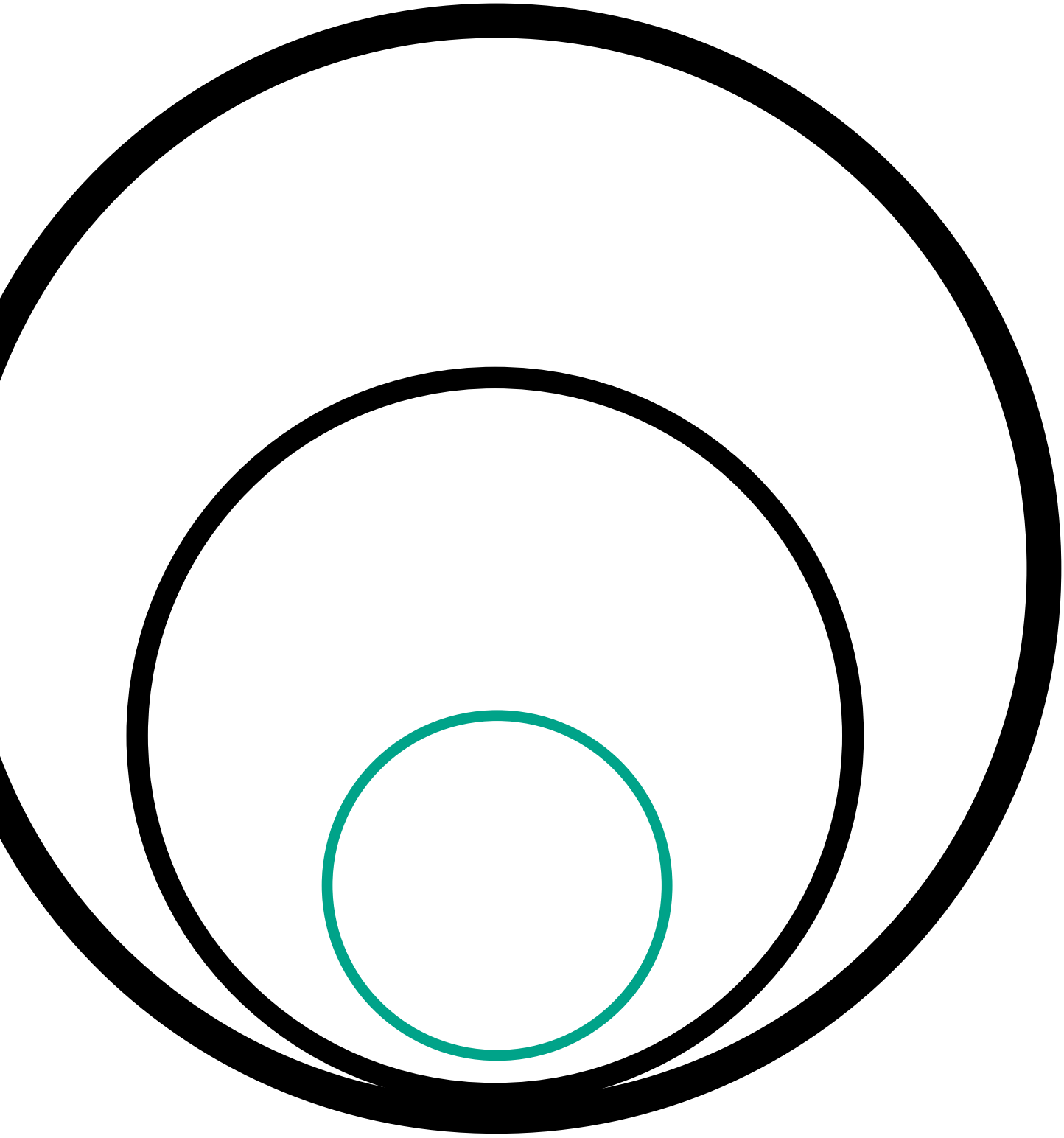
Quality Improvement Agency

Vocational Learning Support Programme



Putting learning first

Applied GCSEs



Putting learning first

Applied GCSEs

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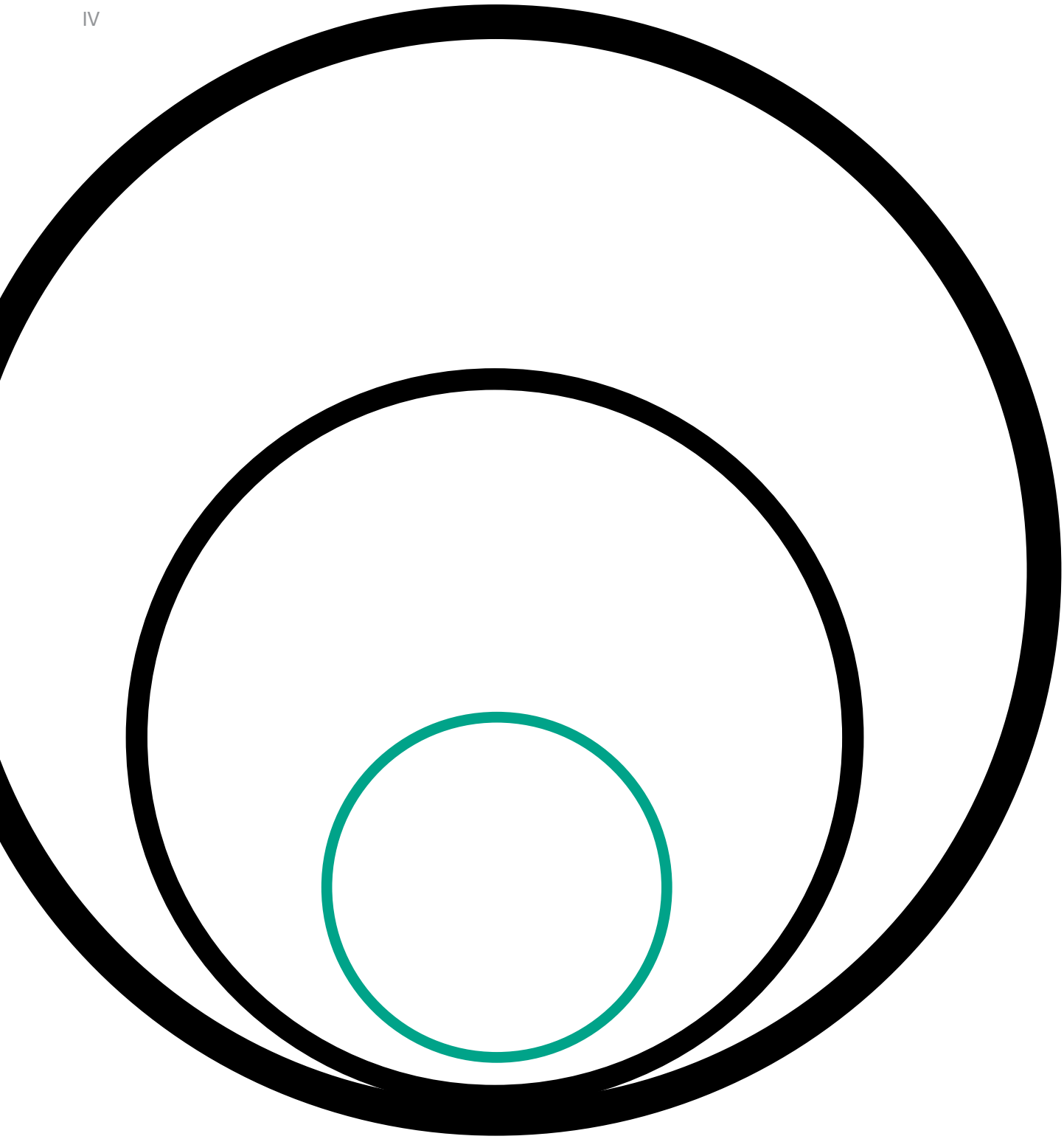

Section 1
The key issues in learning

The quality of learning has been the subject of much debate in recent years. Where learning is poor, it ultimately manifests itself in under-achievement.

Factors that prevent high-quality learning taking place can be grouped under the following headings:

- **planning** – planning for the whole programme and the individual sessions that deliver it is ineffective; learning aims and objectives tend not to be set and/or shared with the students
- **session structure** – learning sessions lack structure
- **differentiation** – tasks, activities, assignments and teaching material lack a differentiated approach and fail to meet the needs of individual students
- **teaching methods** – teaching is dull and uninspiring; it lacks variety and there is minimal or no use of information and communication technology
- **methods of testing learning** – learning is not rigorously tested by appropriate methods.

This publication will take each of these headings to demonstrate the importance of focusing on the learner when planning and delivering a vocational curriculum.

Ultimately, the role of a teacher is to inspire students to learn and achieve their learning goals. In carrying out that role, teachers require the support of the senior management team (SMT). The actions of the SMT set the tone, whether positively or negatively, for staff and students. Teachers and students need visible evidence that the SMT is committed to raising achievement levels and regards vocational learning to be an integral part of the centre's curriculum.

It is hoped that the guidance in this publication will support centres to raise the quality of their teaching and learning sessions. It aims to show how schools and colleges can alleviate some of the poor practice that has an adverse effect on teaching and learning and thus avoid judgements such as these, which have been lifted from recent Ofsted inspection reports.

- ‘In a great many sessions, the use made of differentiated teaching and learning is poor.’
- ‘The quality of differentiated material is inadequate.’
- ‘Teachers do not always take account of the differing needs of learners.’
- ‘In some business studies sessions, although learners worked steadily on relevant tasks, these did not provide a sufficient challenge for the more able.’
- ‘Learners are usually all engaged in the same activity, are expected to work at the same pace regardless of their starting point, and in some cases are bored and uninterested.’
- ‘ICT was not used in business and administration teaching, and overhead projectors were used in only two lessons. PowerPoint presentations in management and professional classes, especially for accounting, are insufficiently used.’
- ‘Teachers make little use of IT in lessons and often learners are not given practical tasks to enliven their lessons.’
- ‘Although learners use the internet for research purposes, few learning materials for businesses are available on the college’s intranet. Some printed handouts are of poor quality.’
- ‘Little attention is paid to learners’ individual learning needs.’
- ‘Too often, lesson content and the teaching are unimaginative and uninspiring.’
- ‘Programme schemes of work and lesson plans are unhelpful and lack planning for effective teaching.’
- ‘Learners have little opportunity to express their views or demonstrate their learning, and their questioning skills are poorly developed. In one lesson, learners did not speak at all.’
- ‘Plans have only a superficial time allocation to activities across the lesson and poor time management in some lessons denies the teacher the opportunity to summarise and explore the learning outcomes. This weakness is reinforced by the absence of learning objectives in plans and the inconsistent evaluation of lessons.’

Section 2
Planning

Audit of learning requirements

Students crave relevance. They often become disengaged by learning and teaching sessions that are driven by worksheets and hypothetical case studies that bear no resemblance to the real world of work. The vocational element of the curriculum can be brought to the fore in many other ways, but as with most things, it requires careful planning.

It is important that teachers undertake an audit of the curriculum in order to identify the learning required and ways for that learning to be promoted in the teaching process. See CPD Activity 2 on page 24.

Important elements of this auditing process include:

- breaking down the assessment criteria and recognising what needs to be taught before developing or asking students to complete tasks, activities and assignments
- compiling a scheme of work that covers what needs to be taught for each unit and which identifies the learning and teaching methods and includes ways for checking learning.

Conducting the above activities will help students to:

- achieve the learning objectives set for each session
- undertake tasks, develop skills and demonstrate their underpinning knowledge as specified by the assessment criteria of each unit
- generate evidence that meets the assessment criteria of each unit.

Strategies for session planning

Before beginning the important task of planning a session to teach a vocational subject, teachers should answer the following questions.

1 Questions to help me think/write about session planning:

- What do I want the students to learn, think about, and be able to do as a result of attending the session?
- What are the general learning aims and objectives?
- What is the relevance of this session to the student, the GCSEs in vocational subjects and the occupational sector?
- What do I know about this content and what more do I need to learn in order to teach it appropriately in a vocational context?
- In what ways does this session link with other subject matter delivered previously or planned for future sessions?
- What resources are available to support my teaching and students' learning?
- What sequence of activities will help students learn these key concepts best?

2 Questions to help me think/write about my students:

- What do my students already know and how can I build on this knowledge?
- How does this unit connect with and build upon students' interests?
- What kinds of adjustments will I need to make for specific students in my class?

3 Questions to help me think/write about specific sessions:

- What might be easy or hard for students?
- What will happen in this session and in what order?
- What kinds of engaging activities will I prepare for this session?
- How much time will be devoted to different parts of the session/activity?
- What will my students and I be doing during this session?
- What kinds of questions will I ask to test students' understanding?

4 Questions to help me think/write about the logistical details of the unit:

- What materials, supplies and equipment will I need?
- How will I manage the time, both within sessions and across the unit?

5 Questions to help me think/write about assessment:

- How will I know what my students are learning in this unit?
- How will students know what they are learning?
- What kinds of ongoing assessment strategies will I use?
- How will I keep track of, and record, students' progress?
- What kind of culminating activity will give students a chance to consolidate and demonstrate what they have learned, and how will I evaluate it?

6 Questions to help me learn while teaching:

- What are different students learning and what evidence do I have of this?
- What are different students struggling with and what evidence do I have of this?
- How can I adjust my teaching to help students in those areas where they need more work? What are some alternatives and what reasons do I have for choosing a particular course of action?
- How can I take into account differences among students and promote genuine learning for all?

7 Questions to help me learn from teaching a unit:

- What did I learn about my students, about the content and about myself as a teacher?
- What went well?
- What were the surprises?
- What would I do differently and why?
- What do I need to learn more about?

Effective session planning will help teachers, whether experienced or new to the profession, to ensure that the key components for promoting learning are included in every session. Teachers should take the following measures.

- Ensure that the aims and objectives of each session are appropriately formulated and articulated to students.
- Ensure that students understand the learning objectives.
- Make effective links with previous sessions that build on prior learning.
- Use a variety of activities to promote interest and motivation.
- Design activities that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Prepare sessions that take into account students' preferred learning styles.
- Make effective use of high-quality, differentiated teaching and learning material.
- Ensure that teaching and learning styles are appropriate to meet the defined learning aims and objectives.
- Ensure that methods of teaching and learning promote equality of opportunity.
- Undertake continuing professional development (CPD) activities to ensure that their vocational knowledge is relevant, up to date and of an appropriate standard for the programme.
- Maintain interest and enthusiasm in the subject and the individual students, and create an environment where all students can learn.
- Build professional teacher–student relationships that are positive and based on a mutual respect that promotes learning.
- Ensure that tasks, activities and assignments are thoroughly debriefed.
- Ensure that feedback is timely, thorough and effective.
- Ensure that students know how well they are progressing and what they need to do to improve.

Section 3
Session structure

Poorly planned sessions that lack structure and do not build in sufficient opportunities to test learning play their part in causing students to become disengaged. Moreover, such sessions often manifest themselves in inappropriate behaviour.

During many teaching and learning sessions, students continue with assignments that they started several weeks ago. When assignments are fit for purpose, there is nothing wrong with this practice. However, difficulties occur when the learning objectives for each session are not defined and articulated to students. This results in students not being aware of what is expected of them, and often prevents them from completing assignments successfully within the time given. If learning objectives for each session are not defined, there is nothing to test learning against. When learning is not tested using appropriate methods, students are not aware of their progress and can become demotivated.

Setting the curriculum in a vocational context

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority stresses that 'delivery should reflect the vocational nature and context of the qualifications, and the industry sector the students are learning about'. For teachers of vocational qualifications that means developing effective links with industry and setting the curriculum in a vocational context, so that students are exposed to current practices in, for example, engineering, business, and art and design.

Teachers might like to consider some of the strategies and methods of support below.

- 'Live' industry examples incorporated into teaching and assessment activities can prepare students for further study or training.
- Many students have part-time jobs while studying. Relevant part-time employment gives students the opportunity to source information and evidence that can contribute to the qualification. However, teachers must ensure that the information and evidence generated from part-time employment are within the vocational context of the qualification and assessed according to awarding body guidelines.
- Work placements are not compulsory but they could enhance the programme for individual students if used appropriately.
- Local authorities and Education Business Partnerships are able to provide support to centres wishing to develop the vocational context for qualifications.
- Professional associations will often have materials, information and websites that will assist in providing vocationally relevant examples.
- Higher education institutions, many of which offer vocational degrees, may be able to support the delivery of courses.

Visits and guest presenters will allow the students to develop their understanding of the vocational context. These require careful planning to maximise learning.

Section 4
Differentiation

Differentiation means 'recognising that each student in a teaching group differs in many ways' (*Personalised learning: meeting individual learner needs*, Jones and Duckett 2006). Teachers should plan learning and teaching sessions in such a way that, despite these differences, all students learn and ultimately achieve.

Differentiated levels of learning

Differentiation helps to pitch work at the right level for a variety of students. As far as possible, teachers should create worksheets that are interactive. In other words, worksheets that have space on them for students to write or draw information, preferably in colour.

These are some of the ways that teachers develop differentiated worksheets or tasks.

- They provide more than one way to complete an assignment. For example: 'Write a paragraph to summarise…' or 'Can you tell me the key differences between…?' or 'What is the idea behind…?'
- They ensure that students have extension work and that it does not include excessive writing, that it is not just more of the same thing and that it is interesting.
- They create worksheets that have three sections, each representing a different level of work. The first section could be in blue, the second section in green and the third section in red. Each section has a particular level of difficulty, but the first section is not the easiest challenge. The teacher sorts students into groups, designating them the blue, green or red group, and the students undertake the relevant section on the worksheet. A pair from each group then feeds back to the class the findings of at least one of their tasks so that each group is valued. The teacher changes the members of the groups from time to time to get the more able students working with those having difficulty. Changing the colours of the different abilities sections avoids labelling students.
- They encourage students to undertake work in different ways: design a poster, create a leaflet, write a report, act out a scenario, record a radio programme – and so on.
- They set work that is appropriate to a student's individual goals as set out in the individual learning plan.
- They know students' preferred learning styles – whether they are visual, auditory or kinaesthetic – and include strategies for each style in every session.
- They remember to include a variety of learning activities. For example, the teacher offers numerous options for homework, assignment work or preparation work. Students could be given two nights to prepare a word search about their subject, such as travel and tourism, to share with other students.

Learning styles

A learning style is the way in which an individual student tries to learn. It concerns the ways in which students approach and experience learning, and use information. There are varying views as to whether a preferred learning style is genetic, depending on which part of the brain is most receptive, or a consequence of the way in which we have been taught. However, it is likely that learning styles are the result of interaction between what is inherited and our experiences.

Visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles

Some practitioners believe that approximately one-third of the population has a preferred learning style that is visual, one-third that is auditory and one-third that is kinaesthetic. However, there is some evidence to suggest that students who are attracted to vocational courses are more likely to be kinaesthetic students. These students often enjoy the more 'hands on' part of a course but sometimes find the theoretical parts more challenging because they are frequently taught in a more visual and auditory style.

Identifying learning styles

The best way to find out a student's preferred learning style is by discussing it with them, but this should not become a labelling exercise. Tests are sometimes used, but the results should be treated with care. Filling in questionnaires and quizzes to determine preferred learning styles can be fun but will not be effective unless they become part of an ongoing programme of learning how to learn. It is in any case always advisable to undertake more than one 'test' to help students to identify their preferred learning styles. Having undertaken the tests, students will have a better idea of how they can help themselves to learn.

Analysis of students' learning styles at induction can help:

- to identify possible challenges for a student
- teachers to plan for differentiation in their teaching and learning materials
- to create a student's individual learning plan.

The importance of teaching and learning styles cannot be over-emphasised when it comes to putting learning first and promoting attainment. There is an educational focus on learning styles because they can meet students' needs and also empower them to be more effective learners. Students can work using their preferred learning styles, but will benefit if they also strengthen their weakest learning styles.

Identifying whether students are auditory, visual or kinaesthetic leaners is the first step to meeting individual needs. The second important process is to prepare session plans that take into account the different learning styles of the students in the group, supported by high-quality, differentiated teaching and learning materials.

As we have observed earlier in this publication, the quality of teaching plays a huge part in shaping students' perceptions of learning and the benefits of attending a timetabled session.

Meeting individual students' needs

Meeting the varying needs of students is not something that happens incidentally; it has to be planned for. Teachers should consider the following measures.

- Undertake thorough and appropriate diagnostic screening to identify any general and specific learning difficulties and support needs.
- Ensure that appropriate support mechanisms are put in place promptly.
- Provide effective tutorial support.
- Identify students' preferred learning styles.
- Ensure that all sessions take into account students' preferred learning styles.
- Undertake planning for success with individual students and record it in an appropriate document such as an individual learning plan.
- Undertake an effective and thorough induction programme.
- Compile appropriate, high-quality, differentiated teaching and learning material.
- Ensure that sessions maintain the interests of all students, where they receive appropriate support to achieve the learning aims and objectives.
- Ensure that able students are challenged to reach their full potential.

Section 5
Teaching methods

Learning should be an interactive exchange between teacher and student. Teachers need to consider how to make sure that learning is the primary objective of every teaching session. They should:

- encourage students to participate by ensuring that they know and understand the learning objectives of each teaching session
- use a range of teaching methods to address students' preferred learning styles
- find ways to encourage students to become more independent
- make appropriate connections between theoretical knowledge and practical application in the relevant industry sector
- challenge more able students through appropriate extension activities and support weaker students
- use differentiated teaching and learning materials
- ensure that appropriate assessment methods are used to meet student, subject-sector and course needs
- provide detailed and constructive feedback that promotes improvement in students' knowledge and skills development.

Using direct instructions to promote learning

In many vocational sessions teachers tend to use the direct instruction model when they want to present a skill. The teacher tells students what they are to learn, shows them directly using modelling and examples, and then gives the students sufficient time to practise and master it. The students' role is to grasp the demonstration and to practise the skills until they understand them. Direct instruction tends to have these parts.

- Anticipatory advice – the teacher prepares students for learning. Teachers can do many things in this first phase of the session, for example, review homework directly connected to the session or hold a class discussion about what students already know.
- Learning activity – the teacher demonstrates the skill to be learned, highlighting health and safety issues, safe working practices and relevant legislation for the sector. In this phase, the teacher is dominant, showing steps or processes that students are to follow.
- Guided practice – students practise the skills with the teacher still guiding them through the process. In this phase, the teacher continues to have a dominant role, correcting students' mistakes and demonstrating the skill again for students having difficulty.
- Independent practice – students practise the skill further without the guidance of the teacher, although the teacher will still be monitoring students' safety.

- Closure – students and/or the teacher discuss what they learned, why it is important and how the learning connects with other things they've learned. Closure might also include the teacher recognising or praising students for work well done. Sometimes it is evaluative, allowing the teacher and students to determine exactly how successful the session has been. Ultimately, the teacher reviews the learning objectives and provides effective feedback on performance.

The timings for each of these phases should be included in the session plan as a guide for teachers but with some flexibility built in to allow for students' contributions. The teacher's activities may include PowerPoint presentations, explanations using an interactive whiteboard and demonstrations of skills and techniques.

The teacher must identify appropriately planned resources, including differentiated teaching and learning materials, that match students' preferred learning styles if weaker students are to be supported to access learning and able students are to be challenged to reach their full potential.

Students need to be active in the learning process if they are to retain what they have learned. Moreover, learning that is carried out with students, rather than to them, is far more enjoyable.

Using classroom tasks and activities to promote learning

Classroom tasks and activities can play an important part in the successful delivery of the vocational curriculum but only if they are appropriately compiled, briefed and debriefed. These processes form the basis of the critical success factors of effective classroom tasks and activities. Classroom tasks tend to be exercises for individual students, whereas activities can be undertaken in pairs or in groups.

Activities must be designed so that all students can achieve – there is no merit in building on failure. However, consideration must be given as to how the more able students are going to be challenged and stretched to meet their full potential.

Teachers need to ask themselves the following questions.

- If the task or activity is to be undertaken in pairs, are the students going to be of equal ability or are a weaker and a more able student going to be paired together to promote peer mentoring?
- If the task or activity is to be undertaken in groups, are students of mixed ability going to be placed together or are students to be grouped in order of ability?
- Are the roles for individual group members defined? For example, who is going to be the scribe and who is going to feed back on behalf of the group to the whole class?
- What support needs to be put in place to help the less able student access learning?
- What additional activities need to be specified to extend the more able student?
- What are the learning objectives of the classroom activity?
- What are the assessment criteria for the classroom activity?
- How will learning be monitored?
- How will feedback be provided?
- What resources will students require to undertake the activity and achieve success?

When incorporating classroom or workshop tasks and activities into a session, teachers need to:

- stipulate clearly what students have to do
- define the assessment criteria that are to be used
- highlight the relevance to the unit, course and occupational sector
- define the time frame
- ensure that activities are appropriate for all students, whatever their age, ability and cultural background
- plan suitably demanding and relevant tasks and activities to meet the course specifications and the interests of the students
- ensure that students are thoroughly briefed before beginning each task and activity and then check their understanding before they commence work
- build in sufficient time to undertake the task or activity to promote success
- provide support to all individuals, pairs or groups of students to ensure that they are kept on task and that the opportunities for success are maximised
- take opportunities, wherever possible, to incorporate peer and self-assessment activities
- debrief tasks and activities thoroughly
- provide appropriate feedback.

Classroom tasks and activities don't work when:

- the timings are wrong – whether they are too long and students become disengaged or too short to meet the requirements of the task successfully
- no time frame has been set
- students are inappropriately briefed and therefore unclear about is expected of them
- the task or activity is set at an inappropriate level
- students do not see the relevance of the task or activity to a particular GCSE in a vocational subject or a subject sector
- students have not received the necessary teaching before beginning an activity
- there is no opportunity for feedback
- the task or activity has not been appropriately debriefed.

Using summary techniques

Teachers should plan their summaries for the last 10 minutes of the session. They should not finish the session early unless they have already warned the students that they will be doing so, otherwise they will miss the prime time for learning at the end of the session.

In the last 10 minutes of the session, teachers can summarise by:

- asking the students: 'What three questions can you now answer that you could not before you came into the room today?'
- handing out three sticky notes to groups of students and asking them to write down the questions they can now answer, to put them on the wall and to read them out aloud
- giving students A4 sheets of paper with the numbers 1 to 5 written on them and a space to write their name at the top; ask students to write the questions they can now answer on the sheets, then read them out or collect them in
- asking pairs of students to write down three questions they can now answer and to feed them back verbally to the whole class.

Using individual learning plans

Individual learning plans should incorporate information relating to learning gathered during induction. Setting goals and SMART targets (see below) is an essential part of formulating an individual learning plan.

Individual learning plans should:

- provide a structure for one-to-one tutorials, focusing the tutor and the students on meeting individual needs
- aid three-way communication between personal tutors, students and subject teachers
- provide students with helpful feedback on their progress
- have specific action plans to promote improved learning as well as short-term, achievable targets such as 'I will attend every session punctually for the next three weeks'; those who hand in assignments late can be given specific dates that can be monitored
- include students' time-keeping, attendance, attitude, motivation and commitment
- be used as a working document by teachers, tutors, learning support assistants and students
- be incorporated into a pastoral care system which centres around the student and learning
- lead to a prompt response to issues that restrict students' progress.

Setting SMART targets

The benefits of setting targets are that students gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to deal with the challenges of adult life and to make decisions about their career options. Setting long-term goals and short-term targets can be extremely motivating for students. Long-term goals can give a vision for the future. They might relate to career aims or qualifications that are likely to take some time to achieve. Short-term targets can challenge students to undertake short bursts of learning activity. They are likely to relate to attitudes, behaviour and study skills that need to be developed and/or improved if the long-term goals are to be achieved. In effect, short-term targets make up the steps that lead to the achievement of a long-term goal.

Targets need to be SMART:

- Specific – they say exactly what students need to do
- Measurable – students can prove they have reached them
- Achievable – students have the potential to achieve them within a reasonable timescale
- Realistic – they are about actions that can be taken
- Time-related – they have deadlines.

The action plan in the individual learning plan specifies what students need to do to achieve the SMART targets and details what and who will help them. If tutors are to support students in setting SMART targets that focus on learning, they must have feedback about students' actual performance from the staff who teach different elements of the learning programme. If this information is available to the tutor, he or she can encourage the students to form a holistic view of their learning. In doing so, it will be possible to make essential links across subjects or units. For example, where a need to develop the research skills of a student has been identified in one curriculum area, targets that seek to improve research skills are likely to benefit that student's research skills across their entire learning programme.

Effective target-setting strategies underpin the value of one-to-one tutorials, which provide a forum for meaningful dialogue between tutor and student and the opportunity to reflect and discuss interventions.

The benefits of setting targets are twofold.

- First, students gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to make decisions about their career options.
- Second, schools and colleges benefit from confident and motivated students who are willing to stay in education post-16.

For more information about target-setting strategies and SMART targets see *Tutorials and target-setting in the effective delivery of vocational A-levels* (Jones and Duckett 2004), available at www.vocationallearning.org.uk

Creating ownership for learning and assessment

Learning by experience plays a crucial role in the delivery of effective vocational education and can help overcome barriers to learning. Learning does not work when students are passive participants. Developing students' abilities to take responsibility for their own learning and encouraging their participation in assessment procedures are important parts of improving engagement.

Section 6
Testing learning

Assessment plays a crucial part in promoting learning and, ultimately, achievement. Students need to know and understand the following before learning can take place:

- what the learning objective is
- why they need to achieve the learning objective
- where they are in terms of achieving the learning objective
- how they can achieve the learning objective.

Sharing this information with students will promote ownership of the learning objectives and a sense of joint responsibility between the teacher and student in trying to achieve them. Students who know what they have to learn and how their success will be measured are likely to produce good work, continue to make progress and stay motivated.

To make assessment effective for students, teachers need to:

- explain the learning objectives to students and check their understanding of them
- demonstrate the standard students are required to achieve and help them to recognise when they have achieved that standard
- give constructive feedback on assessment decisions, so that students know how to improve
- demonstrate high expectations and make it obvious to students that they believe that each student can improve on their past performance
- provide regular opportunities for teachers and students to reflect on the last performance and review students' progress
- develop students' self-assessment skills, so that students can recognise what aspects of their own work need to improve.

Assessment for learning is all about informing students of their progress to empower them to take the necessary action to improve their performance. Teachers need to create learning opportunities where students can progress at their own pace and undertake consolidation activities where necessary.

How to use assessment for learning in classroom practice

Much classroom practice can be described as assessment activity. Teachers set tasks and activities for students and ask questions of them. Students respond to the tasks, activities and questions, and the teachers make judgements on the students' knowledge, understanding and skills acquisition as evidenced in the students' responses. These judgements on students' performance happen quite naturally in the course of any teaching and learning session. They require two-way dialogue, decision-making and communication of the assessment decision in the form of quality feedback to the students on their performance. Depending on how successfully these classroom practices have been undertaken, learning will have taken place to varying degrees from student to student.

At the end of each session, teachers need to ask themselves: What do students know now that they did not know before they attended the session? Although somewhat crude, this will evaluate how effective a particular session has been.

How to communicate assessment criteria

To increase the chances of learning taking place, it is crucial for teachers to share assessment criteria with students. Assessment criteria describe how well a student has to be able to achieve the learning outcome in order to be awarded a particular grade. Assessment criteria should be made clear from the outset of a given task and students' understanding of them checked. Do students understand the purpose of the task and what is it they are trying to achieve?

Teachers need to:

- use language and terminology that students are familiar with to communicate the learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and check students' understanding
- demonstrate how the assessment criteria can be used by way of examples
- familiarise students with the assessment criteria through peer and self-assessment.

How to use the effective questioning technique

No matter how well a teaching and learning session is planned, or how positive a teacher may feel at the end of it, **it is the reaction of the students that matters**. The real test is whether students have learnt and ultimately progressed against the learning objectives defined at the start of the session. Testing learning is an important part of classroom practice, and questioning is one of the most common methods of checking students' understanding. Questioning is something teachers do naturally as part of their daily routine, but developing the skills associated with the questioning technique presents many challenges for teachers and is something that happens over time. Teachers need to review what is to be learnt in any one teaching and learning session and plan for the inclusion of questioning accordingly. When to pose open and closed questions, how to develop a question distribution strategy and when to use questions to check students' knowledge, comprehension and application are all issues that teachers should consider.

Teachers need to be aware that:

- questioning is a skill that needs to be developed
- communication is a two-way process
- questioning is a good way to develop an interactional style of communication
- they need confidence to develop questioning skills
- when they pose a question, they have no idea as to how the student will respond, despite their hopes
- they need to have the courage and confidence to deal with any answer, no matter how bizarre.

Planning the questions

Like everything else, careful planning is required to support the development of the questioning technique and to check learning thoroughly.

Teachers need to plan questioning rather than hope that a question pops into their head at an appropriate moment. It might be useful to list suitable questions on the reverse side of the session plan and use them to check learning at appropriate times. Remember, the order in which teachers ask these questions is also important.

Although teachers may prepare the questions before the session, they may have to change the questions, or use a series of unrehearsed questions, to respond to answers they receive. In other words, teachers need to plan a questioning strategy but be prepared to develop tactics on the spot. It may be useful to pose open questions at the end of one session which stimulate curiosity about the next teaching session.

Remember:

- incorrect answers should not be ridiculed either by the teacher or the remainder of the group of students
- spread the questions around the class so that everybody can participate
- encourage all to join in – in a regulated manner – for example: 'Helen, can you give an example of what James means?'

How to feed back to students

The assessment for learning model is only as good as the quality of feedback provided to students. Successful assessment for learning strategies hinge on the nature of feedback, its content and the way it is received and used by students. Many adults can still remember feedback they received from teachers numerous years later and not always for the best reasons. Generalised statements that mean nothing to the student do not help to promote improvement in individuals' work. Comments such as: 'There are some good bits and some bad bits in this piece of work – keep going!' only serve to leave the student confused and do not identify areas for improvement; nor do they offer practical advice on the required remedial work to overcome shortcomings.

Ultimately, feedback should help students improve in a specific activity. When feedback provides correction or improvement in a piece of work, it is valued by students and acts as an incredible motivator. Remember, teachers must genuinely demonstrate that they believe that all students can learn and improve, but the improvements must be measured against an individual student's previous performance, not that of others.

Students need to be able to trust the teacher/assessor. Publishing and explaining the assessment criteria before the work is undertaken will demonstrate that there is no hidden agenda. Moving the goalposts after work has been set only serves to promote an atmosphere of mistrust.

Feedback should be something that students look forward to receiving – not because it gives praise and offers false hope of success, but because it contains honest, professional judgements. It should be a commendation for what they have done well, coupled with constructive advice and guidance on how to improve and develop areas of their work.

Giving feedback

- Giving feedback is providing information to individuals about their performance or behaviour.
- Feedback should be given in a positive manner and lead to action to affirm or develop an individual's performance or behaviour.
- Feedback should not be of a personal nature. It should focus on hard data, facts or observed examples of evidence.
- Feedback is most useful if it is given soon after a piece of work has been completed.

Types of feedback

- **Affirmation feedback**:

  Affirmation feedback is provided as soon as possible after a performance has been observed. 'Well done, Ben, you observed safe working practices while preparing a window mount for your artwork.'

- **Developmental feedback**:

  'Nancy, next time you stretch paper, use gum strip instead of masking tape to secure the paper to your drawing board.'

- **Effective feedback**:

  Effective feedback is tailored to meet the needs of the individual and is directly linked to observable evidence – either a student's written or practical work or performance of a given task. It focuses on action points. 'A well-constructed piece of work, Julie. You made good use of subheadings throughout. Next time, you might like to consider incorporating bullet points, too.'

  When students complete a piece of work and hand it in to the teacher, they expect two responses: the assessment decision (grade or mark), but more importantly, feedback on their performance.

- Teachers need to provide quality feedback:
- throughout the learning process
- regularly throughout a session
- on completion of classroom tasks
- on completion of homework or self-initiated work
- while working on an assignment – assignments should be designed to include frequent opportunities for review, evaluation and feedback.

The benefits to students of effective feedback

Teachers' feedback should act as scaffolding to support students' skill-building and the acquisition of knowledge. Teachers provide the 'x' factor in promoting learning through intervention strategies and feedback on students' performance. Feedback must not be confused with doing the work for the students or giving them so much help that it becomes the teacher's work. There is an art to providing support and feedback and it is definitely not giving students the solution to a problem as soon as they become stuck. Students must be given opportunities to think a problem through for themselves, so that the piece of work is their own and the end result evidences their learning.

There is no doubt that students can, and do, benefit from effective feedback.

- They know how well they are progressing.
- They are informed of their strengths and of areas they need to improve.
- They know what they need to do to improve.

Effective feedback and its appropriate use can improve:

- **Progress**: progress is made when students know and understand what they need to do to improve and are given time to undertake the required action to bring about an improvement in their work.
- **Achievement**: as a result of progress being made in each teaching and learning session, opportunities for students to achieve will increase.
- **Students handing work in on time**: work being handed in and the return of marked work with feedback is a two-way contract. The dates for handing in and returning marked work should be adhered to by both parties. If feedback is valued, it will promote the desired effect – work is handed in on time.
- **Student confidence**: effective feedback which recognises what the student has done well and instigates further progress is motivating.
- **Motivation**: motivation is enhanced when students can see for themselves that they are improving as a result of taking the action recommended in the feedback.
- **Attendance and timekeeping**: when feedback is valued and thereby worth receiving, students are encouraged to attend teaching and learning sessions and timekeeping does not become an issue.
- **Retention**: when feedback is valued and progress is seen by the student to have been made, retention does not become an issue.
- **Behaviour in class**: the most effective behaviour management strategy is the demonstration of progress which has resulted from effective teaching and learning.
- **Student–teacher relations**: when feedback is effective, students value teachers' contributions and this is apparent in the quality of the student–teacher relationship.
- **Student participation in class**: when students receive helpful and constructive feedback, they are encouraged to contribute to classroom activities.

How to use peer and self-assessment to promote learning

It is widely recognised that learning is maximised when students are fully engaged in the learning process. Part of this involves students knowing **what** they have to learn, **why** they have to learn it (how it fits into the course of study and which unit it is part of) and **how** it is to be assessed. Peer assessment provides a useful opportunity for students to become familiar with the assessment criteria. By marking another person's piece of work, using the assessment criteria, students' understanding of what they need to achieve improves. Peer assessment also helps to consolidate learning.

The benefits of organising peer assessment activities include:

- students clarifying their own ideas and understanding of the learning outcomes
- the ability to check individuals' understanding of the assessment criteria and how it is to be applied to their work

As with teacher assessment, students should only be judged and thereby assessed using the published assessment criteria. It must be stressed that peer assessment must be managed carefully. If peer-assessment activities are not appropriately managed by the teacher:

- students will be publicly ranked according to their performance – this will only serve to demotivate less able students
- students who are performing well will not find peer-assessment activities challenging and therefore their learning will not be extended, which defies the very principles upon which the assessment for learning philosophy is based.

From peer assessment to self-assessment

Once students are able to use the assessment criteria appropriately and can actively contribute to peer-assessment activities, the next step is to engage them in self-assessment tasks. Self-assessment is a very powerful teaching tool and crucial to the assessment for learning process. Once students can engage in peer-assessment activities, they will be more able to apply these new skills to undertaking 'objective' assessment of their own work. We all know it is easy to find fault in other people's work, but it is a far more challenging process to judge one's own work. Once students can assess their own work and their current knowledge base, they will be able to identify the gap in their own learning; this will aid learning and promote progress and contribute to the self-management of learning.

Teachers need to:

- provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own work
- ensure that they provide individuals with the necessary support so that individuals are able to acknowledge shortcomings in their own work
- support students through the self-assessment process so that strengths in their work are fully recognised and weaknesses are not exaggerated to the point that they damage students' self-esteem.

Teachers may wish to present a series of anonymous students' work, possibly from a previous cohort, so that students can review and evaluate work that does and does not meet the assessment criteria. This will clarify what has been required in a task/activity/assignment and lessons learnt can be applied to their own work.

How to find out what has not been understood

One way of finding out what students have or have not understood during a session is to ask them to pair up and discuss two things that they have learned and two things that they have not grasped. Give them a few minutes to do this then ask them to share the essence of their discussion with the rest of the class.

The advantage of this method is that a student who has difficulty understanding a particular concept might be able to learn from their partner who understands it fully and is able to offer further explanation and examples. If both students have not understood the same thing, they will feel happier about telling the teacher. Sometimes students are reluctant to admit to the teacher that they do not understand something because they think they are the only ones. This strategy is a good way of getting round this.

Summary

Questions for teachers: assessment

- How will I know what my students are and are not learning (in this unit)?
- How will students know what they are learning?
- What kinds of ongoing assessment strategies will I use?
- How will I keep track of and record students' progress?
- What kind of culminating activity will give students a chance to consolidate and demonstrate what they have learned, and how will I evaluate it?

Questions for teachers: teaching

- What are different students learning and what evidence do I have of this?
- What are different students struggling with and what evidence do I have of this?
- How can I adjust my teaching to help students in those areas where they need more work?
- How can I take into account differences among students and promote genuine learning for all?

Section 7
Continuing professional development (CPD)

CPD activities

The CPD activities in this section can be undertaken individually or in groups. They can be used in team meetings, during INSET days or at CPD events. If the activities are to be undertaken in groups, the facilitator should instruct each group to elect a scribe and a person to feed back to all the participants. Flip chart paper and marker pens should be provided. Always set a time frame for the activity. Remember, it is the debriefing of the task that is the valuable element. Give delegates an opportunity to consider the key issues, to identify the critical success factors and to debate areas of concern. Feedback to all the participants by each of the groups should be typed up afterwards and disseminated to delegates.

Activity 1

In groups, identify five barriers to learning and possible ways of eliminating them.

Activity 2

Undertake an audit of Unit 1 of a vocational qualification (based on your subject specialism) and identify what students must learn. Devise a session to deliver one aspect of the unit. Define the learning objectives of the session, using the evidence generated from the unit audit. Prepare to deliver the session by identifying two or more teaching and learning methods that cater for the preferred learning styles of students in a group that you teach. Based on the learning objectives of the session, identify appropriate methods for checking that learning has taken place, taking into account students' needs.

Activity 3

Devise a session for a unit that requires the input of one or more learning support staff (eg a basic skills tutor, a learning support assistant or a signer who supports a student with a hearing impairment – not a teaching assistant). Remember that the role of the support worker is to promote learning and ultimately the attainment of the learning objectives.

Activity 4

In groups, devise a six-point strategy that will help teachers to integrate individual learning plans into the debriefing of an assignment or an applied GCSE unit recently completed by students.

Hints:

1. What preparation do the students need to have carried out before the debriefing session?
2. What preparation is required of the teacher and support staff before the debriefing session?
3. What should have been achieved by the end of the session?

Activity 5

Compile a plan to support a session that delivers Unit 1 of an applied GCSE and which incorporates information and communication technology (ICT). Consider how ICT can be used to maximise learning opportunities for students of all abilities, supporting weaker students and stretching more able students to reach their full potential.

Activity 6

Devise a six-point strategy for teachers undertaking a two-hour induction session that encourages students to take an active part in their own learning.

Hints:

1. What preparation do students need to have carried out before the session?
2. What preparation is required of the teacher and support staff before the session?
3. What should students have achieved by the end of the session?
4. What will be used to determine whether the session has been successful or not?
5. What resource materials will be required?

Activity 7

Consider the merits of groupwork, particularly the benefits it offers to students.

Why work in groups?

Some students prefer to complete activities as part of a group rather than individually. Groupwork is highly relevant to the workplace – the majority of employers require their new recruits to have teamwork skills – but it is only effective if all group members cooperate. If all members contribute and work together:

- ideas can be pooled
- problems can be seen from a different perspective
- students can learn from each other
- learning can continue after the formal teaching session has finished
- students' motivation can be increased if an element of competition is introduced.

Although paired and groupwork can be very effective, it needs to be well structured and managed to avoid 'off-task' activity. Devise a session that makes effective use of groupwork. Consider and incorporate:

- before-session preparation
- group selection
- activity brief
- management of the group activity
- assessment of the activity.

And remember the 10 steps to putting learning first

1. At the beginning of each session, clearly explain the learning objectives and check students' understanding of them.
2. Be mindful of students' preferred learning styles and differing abilities. Remember that teaching and learning strategies should support the achievement of the learning aims and objectives.
3. Make sure that learning and teaching materials are relevant and promote students' interest in the achievement of the learning objectives. Check readability levels and the depth of challenge offered by extension activities.
4. Include opportunities for peer support, peer assessment and self-assessment. Ensure that group activities challenge able students and support weaker students.
5. Remember that individual learning plans informed by initial assessment and periodic reviews are working documents valued by the student and all teachers, and that they exist to promote increased achievement by meeting individual students' needs.
6. Ensure that the briefing and debriefing of activities and assignments is thorough. Check students' understanding of key concepts and requirements before they begin work.
7. Provide evaluative feedback on students' progress throughout the session to motivate and engage them. Feedback needs to have the right balance of correction and encouragement and should include advice and guidance on how to improve.
8. Ensure that learning takes place with students, not to them. Design activities to promote interaction and encourage students' contributions to the learning experience.
9. Plan for effective use of other professionals, such as learning support assistants, to promote learning for all.
10. Check that assessment methods are suitable to meet the needs of individual students and appropriate for checking against the learning objectives.

Other resources

Putting learning first is complemented by a series of other publications covering active learning, personalised learning and assessment for learning, as well as a directory of resources for the classroom. These can be found at www.vocationallearning.org.uk

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Learning is maximised when students are fully engaged in the learning process. For teachers and managers this means planning and delivering a curriculum that is relevant, engaging, aimed at meeting individual students' needs and clear in its aims and objectives. *Putting learning first* offers guidance on effective planning and teaching and includes sections on differentiation, teaching methods and assessment.

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