Kate Daellenbach – MARK 202 AND MARK 310

Award-winning teacher Kate Daellenbach hasn’t had the opportunity yet to trial Excell, but is already a leader in introducing integration and engagement processes to her courses.

“You can establish a social atmosphere in the class and make students interact and converse and feel they are part of the group. This is especially important today when we have so-called social media which actually encourages people to work alone. One of the benefits of coming to class is discussion with other students. The course coordinator is a springboard, but students learn from each other. So I want a class that is a community that talks.”

On a Daellenbach course students are made clearly aware that a key expectation is they will engage in discussion. “This is a class in which they will participate. I can then pick on people, on individuals, and get them to talk in class. If they’re not sure, they can give me non-verbal clues and I’ll move on. This is not about embarrassing them or making them feel stupid. Usually what they say has relevance and it’s up to the lecturer to make it relevant.”

Often a question will be tossed on the floor and the students are expected to engage with a neighbour in discussion for two or three minutes before reporting back their ideas. “In a class of 300 this can be quite daunting. I tell them to make noise.”

In her 300-level paper Kate provides activities or questions and splits the class of 120 into groups who can leave the theatre for discussion. “Some kids are a long way from home. It can be very lonely. That can mean a lot of impacts for us down the line. People can face some real issues and lose it entirely. Besides answering the specific task, these exercises mean they get to know the people around them.”

She also provides the circumstances for breaking up natural groupings and to encourage development of new alignments in discussions. This increased sociability and a greater exchange of ideas and perspectives.
Kate found particularly helpful the Teaching and Learning workshops run by John Davies, where course coordinators present their methods for improving student engagement. “The best teachers say they learn the students’ names. I can’t learn them all, but I can make an effort. It makes them a person, not a number. It means something to them.”

Lectures and tutorials were best attended with engaged students where it was evident they would “get something out of it”. “I make tutorials clearly relevant to the assignments. One of the benefits is they are in smaller groups where they really get to know each other, and if they do the activity then by the end of the tutorials the ground work is done for the assignment. They get feedback and confirmation.”

Kate provides a handbook for her tutors providing activities and expectations. “We should train tutors more. How to create groups, how to encourage them to engage and participate and to move the students around. When students hear ideas and applications of concepts from other students it means so much more. The tutors are not there to give a lecture but to walk through the assigned task. It’s about participation, so the students feed off each other, discussing what they have found.”

Wherever possible, Kate takes tutorials herself to encourage cohesion and stay in tune with student progress and so she can signal issues and solutions to her tutors. “I would encourage any school to encourage staff to take at least one tutorial and have it included in the workload allocation. It keeps you more tuned in to the class and the tutors.”

Kate said these strategies provided definite positive outcomes. “I want to build a positive learning environment. Where do you learn best? In a place where you have colleagues, and the lecturer is interested in your learning. If the kids feel they are part of a social group they are happier, they have support. Do we see better grades? I think we do in 310. Do we get higher attendance in lectures at both levels? Yes we do. Do we get better attendance and engagement at tutorials? Yes we do. If I wasn’t into helping students I wouldn’t be here, and I do think security, integration, having discussions in class, building a community in the class certainly helps.”