Large group teaching / teaching across GEES subjects

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Some (sort of) universal truths?

- GEES is on the increase and class sizes are getting bigger

- Geographers (in particular) are a diverse bunch!

- Teaching across GEES often involves compulsory 'fundamentals' modules that are large classes of first year students (often team-taught)

- Some (though not all) students in the class don't want to be there

- New/junior lecturers are often asked to teach these!

- These modules are very important for setting the students on their learning journey and building expectations

Rank the following in order of importance (1 = most important, 4 = least important):
The role of the lecturer is to:

a) impart knowledge previously learnt by the lecturer to the students
first-years: 39% ranked first, third-years: 36% ranked first → **'Fundamentals'**

b) facilitate ways for the students to obtain knowledge
first-years: 36% ranked first, third-years: 57% ranked first → **This is our main purpose**

c) conduct research and impart the latest developments to the students
first-years: 11% ranked first, third-years: 0% ranked first

d) ensure the students obtain a degree
first-years: 11% ranked first, third-years: 7% ranked first

Francis RA (2008) An investigation into the receptivity of undergraduate students to assessment empowerment, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5): 547 — 557

Teaching across GEES

- Particular challenges (and opportunities?):

- No single canon or tradition, other than some broad concepts, methods and use of fieldwork (and lab) – GEES programmes will touch on similar topics but perhaps in very different ways

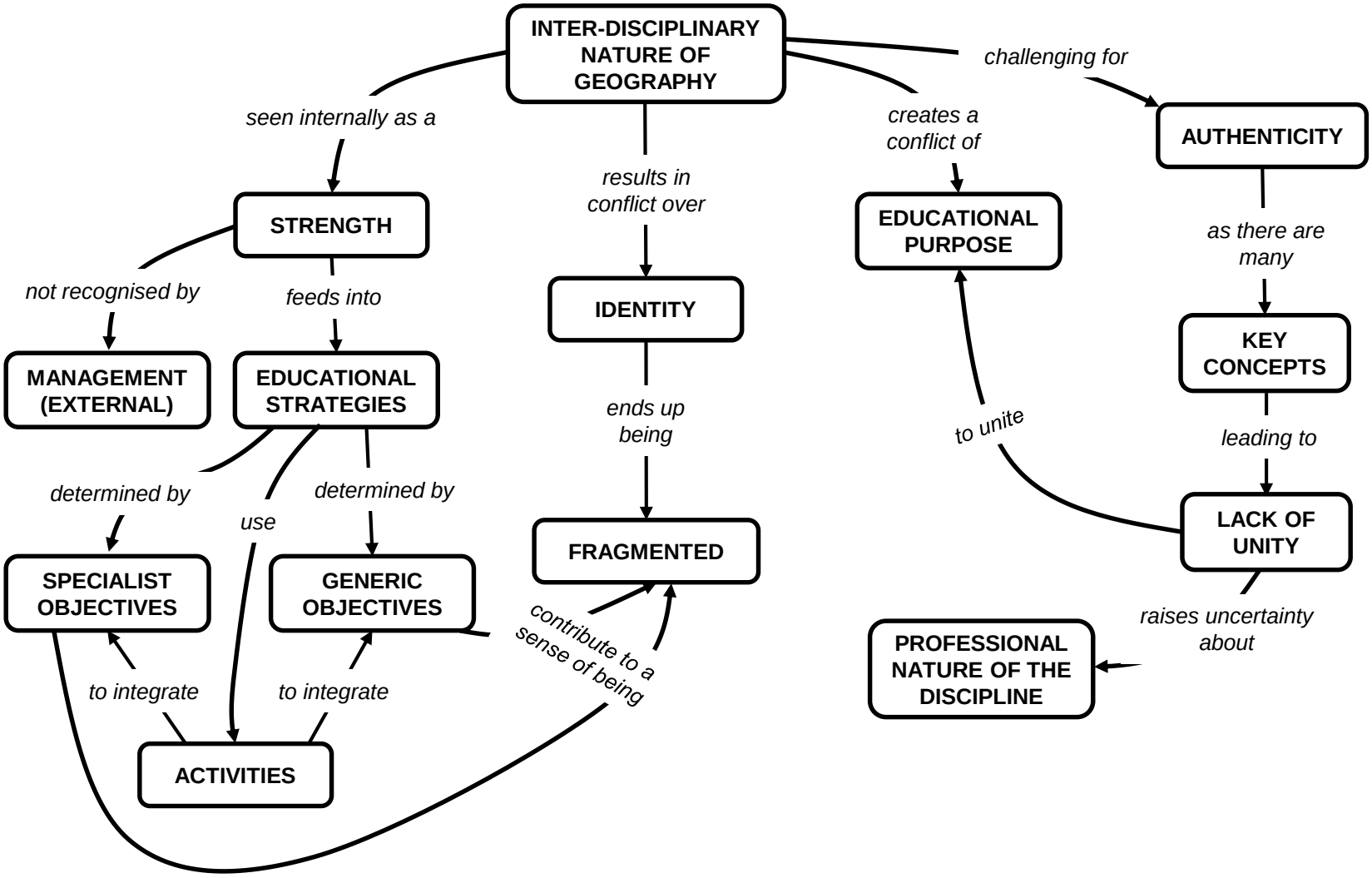
- Diversity of both staff and student backgrounds and levels of knowledge

- Balancing breadth and depth and 'satisfaction'

- Managing expectations – intellectually and operationally

- STEM or not? "It would however be difficult to pursue a career in a predominantly science or mathematics focused career with Geography alone." – Uni Leeds website (their typo)

- Non-traditional teaching rare (?)



Kinchin IM and Francis RA (2016): Mapping pedagogic frailty in geography education: a framed autoethnographic case study, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/03098265.2016.1241988

Teaching across GEES

• Put yourself in the students' shoes – what are they likely to know for their level and backgrounds? What topics are 'hot'? Challenging, esp. international students

• Is there specific terminology or differences in understanding between disciplines that should be cleared up at the start?

• There is a fine line for 'expertise' – you may have spent years researching a topic but you don't need to throw it at the students, or demonstrate your 'expertise' – this should come in your guidance to the students, and responses to questions.

• You may also be teaching material you don't want to (or know) – but if this is apparent it will also create a lack of interest in the students – fundamentals are rarely 'vanity modules'.

• Human/physical divide or preference – for me, also biology + geography.

• “I’m only really lecturing to the interested 30%”

→ Targeting cohorts creates dissatisfaction and high failure rates. Consider everyone.

• “Just get them through”

→ Avoid the temptation to make fundamentals modules too basic and easy to encourage pass rates.

• “Don’t try too hard, then no-one will take your other modules and you’ll have less work to do!”

→ This used to work well! Now NSS and TEF have changed this.

• “The first year fundamentals are to make sure everyone is on the same page”

→ This is impractical. Repeating A-level material might get some students up to speed but others will be bored and turned off (e.g. physical geography). Gradation needed.

- Use simple terms and definitions to build on

- Build in real-world examples and case studies

- Don't just set readings – set key readings and explain what each one is there for

- Gradations/hierarchy of material – beginner – intermediate – advanced

- Emphasise the value of interdisciplinarity and diversity of knowledge at all levels, esp. as this relates to Geography

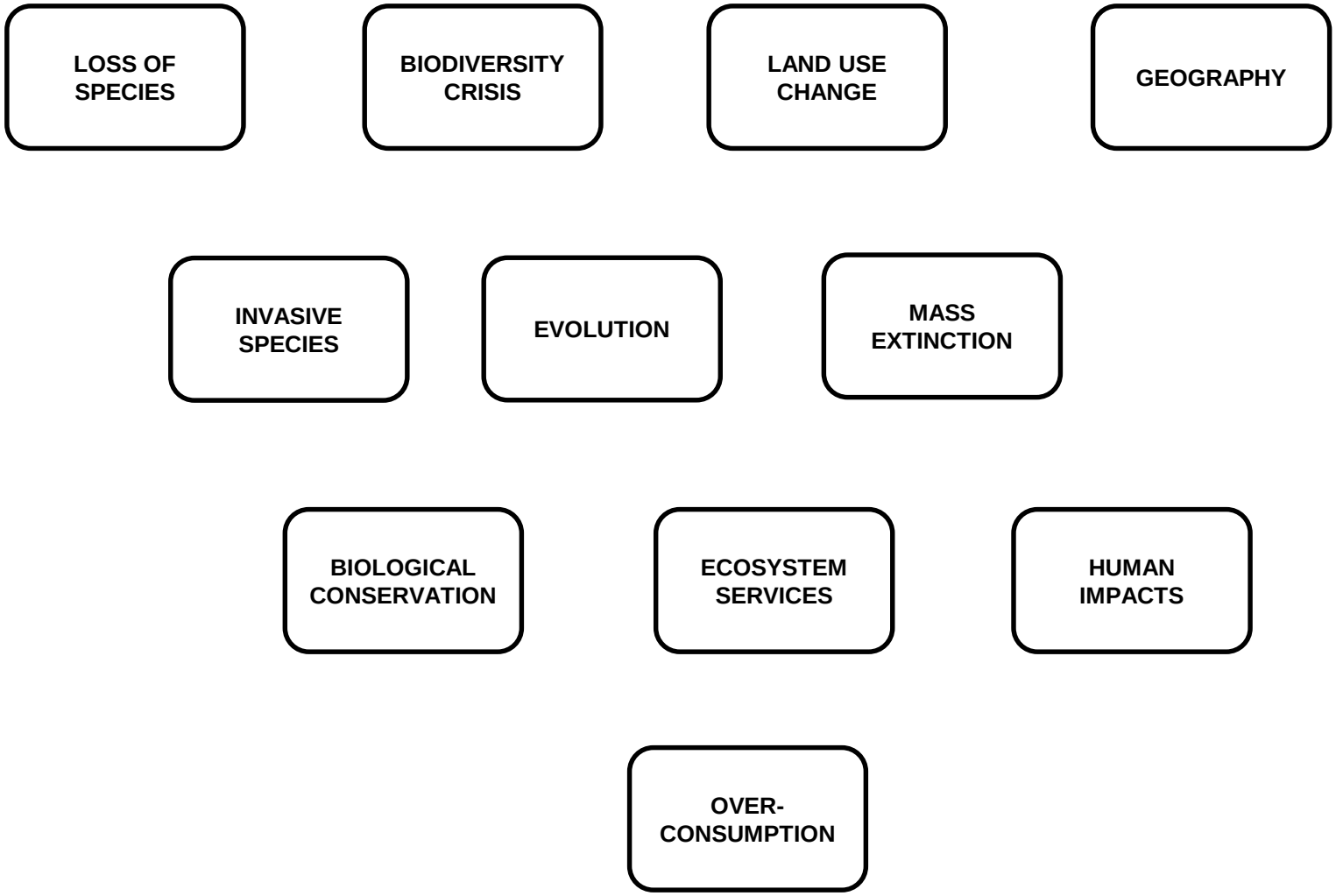
- Where possible build in constructivist approaches as this really helps interdisciplinary understanding

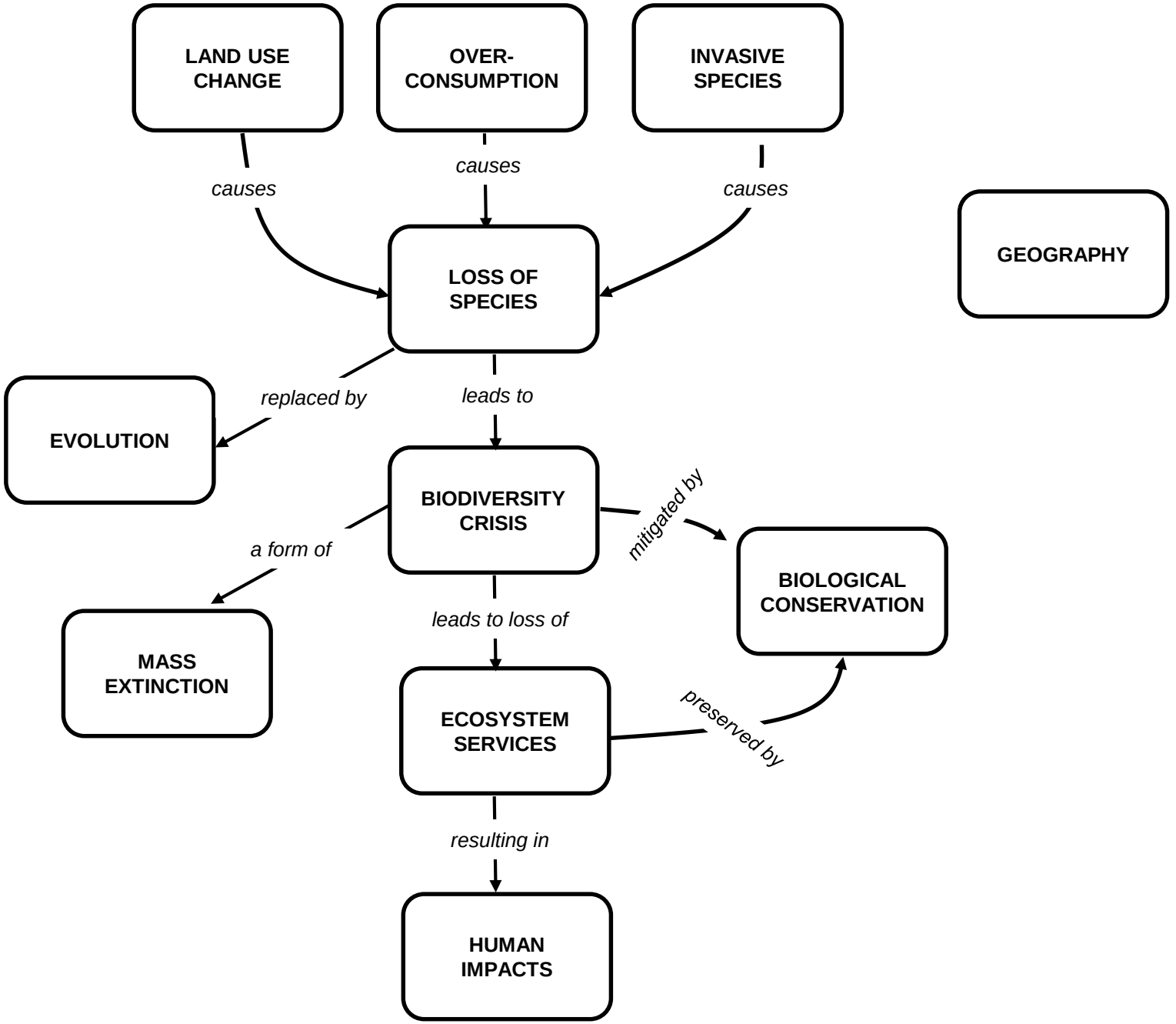
• E.g. Biodiversity Crisis (to human geographers and physical geographers of all backgrounds, as a way of exploring 'biogeography')

• The Basics → what is biodiversity? – what is the crisis? – what is causing the crisis? – why does it matter? – how does biodiversity vary geographically – what can be done about it? (also for assessment). Case study: charismatic species[No/limited reading]

• For the Interested → evolution and extinction – drivers of the latitudinal gradient – biophilia – evidence bases and fossil records – human and physical drivers. Case study: invasive species. [Key reading]

• For the Enthusiastic → conservation mechanisms and legislation – ecosystem services and processes – why is this Geography? Case study: landscape change and conservation in the UK. [Wider reading]


LOSS OF SPECIES
BIODIVERSITY CRISIS
LAND USE CHANGE
GEOGRAPHY
INVASIVE SPECIES
EVOLUTION
MASS EXTINCTION
BIOLOGICAL CONSERVATION
ECOSYSTEM SERVICES
HUMAN IMPACTS
OVER-CONSUMPTION


LAND USE CHANGE
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mitigated by
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MASS EXTINCTION
leads to loss of
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preserved by
resulting in
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Current Research Coursework Guide

• **With reference to AT LEAST one seminar, critically reflect on the practice, and potential contribution to society, of geographical research in the 21st century.**

• The practice of geography – what IS geography? What is special/unique about it? What are its main concepts and themes, and how are these being researched?

• "*An attempt to find and impose order on a seemingly chaotic world; an attempt that is simultaneously modern and pre-modern, ancient and contemporary.*" (Bonnett 2008, p. 6)

• "*Geography is the study of Earth's landscapes, peoples, places and environments. It is, quite simply, about the world in which we live.*" (RGS 2015)

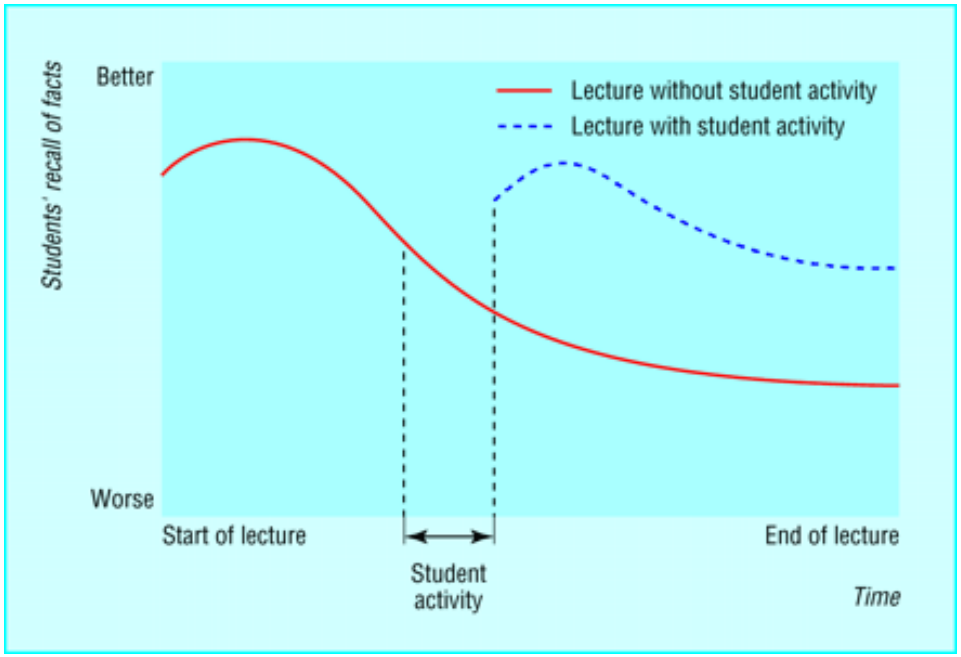
• Consider the main themes listed by the RGS, and which you have been introduced to throughout your degree:

Bonnett A (2008) *What is Geography*? London: Sage

Lectures: what are they good for?

• Purpose: stimulate interest, explain concepts, provide core knowledge, and direct student learning.

• Results: Passive, surface learning. Students receive information but have little opportunity to process or critically appraise the new knowledge offered. Not good for teaching skills, changing attitudes, or encouraging higher order thinking



• Large groups especially!

Cantillon P (2003) BMJ 2003; 326

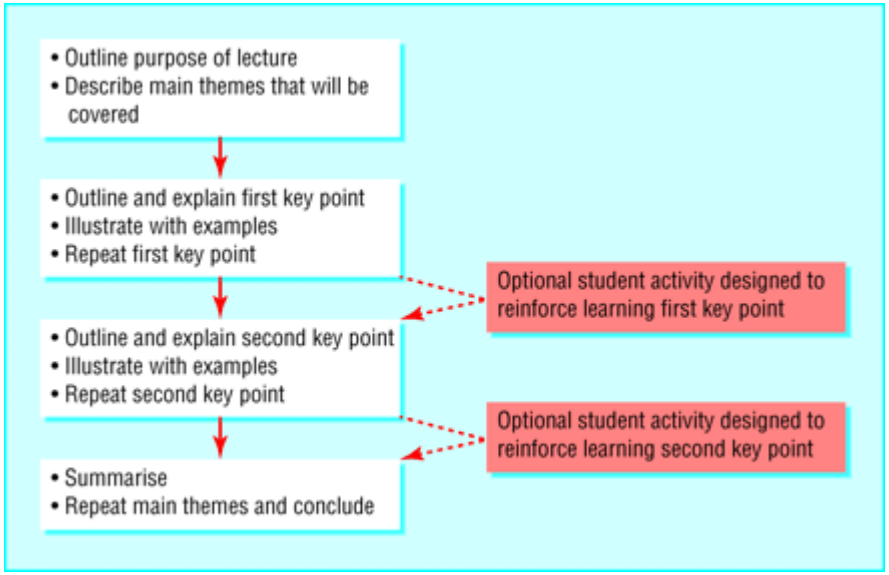
Planning for large groups

• Hierarchy of material (1) what is essential; (2) what is useful and illustrative; (3) what is interesting but non-essential.

• (1) Needs to be understood by everyone; (2) should be aimed at the interested student but in an approachable way; (3) can be aimed at those with more advanced understanding (e.g. those who have done the readings). 50/30/20 ratio.

• Manage your expectations and those of the students – what can be realistically achieved given time and format – tell the students that this is the starting point, and how the lecture fits into what they should be doing

• Same principles for assessment – essentials = pass, extra material for excellence



Engaging large groups

• Diversity of delivery – slides, videos, discussions, websites. But…

• Less is more! More does not always = better. Don't pack too much material in, and don't be afraid to pause and to just talk, or be silent – PPT should not be a crutch – the slides are there to indicate, illustrate and remind, not to read out. Consider non-linear structures.

• Attention spans. Yours ain't great, either. Don't take it personally.

• Small-group work (breakout or buzz groups), especially if linked to worksheets, concept maps or problem-solving

• Ask and repeat questions

"Tell me, and I forget. Show me, and I remember. Involve me, and I understand"
Chinese proverb

• Assessment is problematic and tends to be 'quick and easy' with limited chance for development and discussion unless you make time for it – so do, if you can.

• Utilise technology (TEL) but don't rely on it – it's not always impressive though may be expected by students.

- Multiple choice questions
- Quizzes
- Questionnaires
- Lecture capture

• Team-taught modules (which large groups often are) can create diversity but also reduce consistency

• Are you saying what you think you are saying? Look at lecture capture, student responses, student questions, peer observations

Things to consider

- Gender and age, caring and work responsibilities – access and availability
- Feedback always worse for large classes
- 'Mob effect' for behaviour
- Enthusiasm key for maintaining interest
- Timing of day and point in term really matter (esp. in London!)