

Fewer lectures, more group work

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Professor Cees van der Vleuten from Maastricht University is a Visiting Professor at Wits University who believes that learning should be student centred.

"A lot of what we see in universities is [education](#) which is very much focused on a traditional model of [learning](#) – didactic teaching mostly through lectures and exams – whereas more student-centred education reduces the number of lectures and requires students to work more with their knowledge," says Van der Vleuten.

The Centre for Health Science Education in the Wits Faculty of Health Sciences has requested Van der Vleuten to assist the Faculty in understanding how this pertains to health sciences education. His support will be twofold.

"The first priority is to help and support the training programmes in the Faculty of Health Sciences by looking at what they are currently doing and where improvements could be made," he says. "The second priority is to support the Faculty with scholarly work and to look for areas in which we could do research and possibly publish."

According to Van der Vleuten, in his own institution, there are hardly any lectures and most of the learning is done in groups guided by a teacher. "We do that because there is a fundamental misconception in education that once we have told students something, they have learnt it. But learning is about internalising and applying knowledge. It is interesting that our dominant form of instruction – lectures – is not

always our most effective," he says.

This implies a gap between the practice of education and what we know about learning. In the health sciences, this gap is particularly problematic.

Dr Lionel Green-Thompson, the Clinical Coordinator in the Centre for Health Science Education and the Assistant Dean for Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Health Sciences, says that teaching in the health sciences is a complex affair. "In many other disciplines you can get away with just knowing, but in health sciences the conversion of knowing to doing is crucial. The interface is equally important but not as clear in something like engineering."

According to Van der Vleuten, there needs to be a lot of emphasis on behavioural skills – a lot more authentic learning. "What you have to do is to present your learners with authentic tasks as soon as possible in your curriculum and that is really important in the health sciences."

He says that South Africa is unique in terms of the diversity that teachers and students are confronted with. This poses challenges, but according to Van der Vleuten, some research has shown that diversity can also bring educational benefits because students can support each other. This phenomenon is one of the reasons why he is excited about working in South Africa.

He says that he is always open to requests to serve as a Visiting Professor because he enjoys being able to contribute. "I think that it is part of my role in the [health sciences](#) community to serve that community in whatever way I can. It is also fun to work with people from different cultures. I am also fascinated by the fact that, despite the context, when we talk about education, the problems are always very similar."

Provided by Wits University

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