

“What Makes A Good Lecturer?”

I'm going to hazard a guess here when I say I believe this to be a question most lecturers have asked themselves at some point during their teaching career. After all, it must be a considerable challenge to gauge how effective your lecture sessions are, based purely on the feedback provided by a handful of students' faces. Particularly if these students are of the 'tired and unresponsive' subset, of which I can certainly say I have contributed towards at some point over the past few years...

So is there some Secret Formula to being a good lecturer? Given the individuality of any single person, each lecturer will likely have their own way of presenting the material to the class – but this should not dictate whether a specific method is better than another. Some techniques that work well for certain lecturers may do nothing for others. I will therefore try to consider not only some useful practices, but also what I feel to be the main characteristics and personality traits that would justify a good lecturer.

I find one of the more beneficial aspects of a lecturer is to have a generally consistent routine. This would relate to such factors as showing up to the lecture at a given time, maintaining a certain amount of slide coverage per lecture, consistency in handout materials and so on. Even if there are some negative aspects, so long as the lecturer follows a pattern, the students can at least have a good idea of what to expect! Since people in general are comfortable with familiarity, and given students fall under the category of 'people', this suggests that regularity in lecturing technique is a definite plus.

Similarly, being able to correctly allocate time to a topic is another important skill for a lecturer to exhibit, as it will strengthen the students' confidence that all relevant materials will be covered prior to the exam. A steady progression through the course notes provides an effective means for tracking your own progress, and for planning personal workload on a schedule. A lecturer should also take into consideration the fact that some topics may require longer to cover than had been initially expected, so it is always worth planning for this in advance – just to have some time flexibility!

For a lecturer to be passionate about the subject they teach is arguably the greatest trait of all. The person that admires what they do will know the ins and outs of the subject, and thus be able to abstract the material appropriately for whichever level is appropriate, which in turn will make for more interesting listening. For instance, a lecturer I had a few years ago would usually append each learning outcome with how this section we had just covered was “the single most truly beautiful thing ever”.

It was fantastic to see a lecturer genuinely enjoying what he was doing, and passing on his knowledge of that field to a new generation. I have to be honest though, at the time I struggled to find the material THAT beautiful... but I definitely appreciated it far more than if the lecturer had not been such a character! His upbeat attitude was hugely encouraging, I had never experienced this kind of atmosphere in a lecture before. I'm certain his passion for the subject brushed off on myself and others, which vastly enhanced my learning experience. I actually looked forward to those lectures, the entertainment value was brilliantly unique!

Speaking of entertainment – making students laugh should definitely be applied as an aid during the lecture. It not only takes some of the pressure off the host, but additionally acts as a minor interlude during what may be an unavoidably dull session of Blah for the 4th time in as many days. Injecting a bit of humour into the mix always tends to lighten the tone, and laughter is supposedly said to act as a memory trigger, which could even enhance the learning of material by simple association. Though it may be difficult to make the lecture in itself funny, a joke here or there would certainly be welcome.

Obviously though, students don't go to lectures and expect them to be a stand up comedy session every time. Likewise, in terms of a lecturer's undying passion for their area of study, this should be sufficient enough to draw in the audience and yet maintain a certain aura of self-control, so as to avoid tangential series of irrelevant information being thrown upon us during the middle of a particularly taxing learning outcome... As with most things though, in moderation, both humour and passion can be fantastic resources which may be used to boost student morale and maintain focus.

It should follow then, that good people skills are a virtue to be had in this field. Being able to communicate ideas effectively is essentially the whole point of lecturing! It would therefore make sense that a person be able to convey facts and thoughts to a classroom, in a friendly, approachable, and generally good-natured manner. This will pay off for both parties, since students will be more likely to pay attention to somebody they can respect, and as a result they should have no qualms in questioning certain areas they may not understand so well.

To be able to associate with students on the same level is a significant method for establishing a helpful connection, and will provide the lecturer access to more valuable criticism on such things as coursework, lecture materials, how the students are progressing with the work and so on. A little empathy goes a long way as well, in knowing when a break from work is justified or necessary. The life of a student isn't all fun and games, a lot of time is spent stressing out about work too!

From another perspective, I will consider the following theory: surely the student must play some sort of role in shaping a good lecturer? After all, the lecture is not being presented to a room of empty people! Unless of course it has been a particularly bad turn out on that day... It should be noted though, that the lecturer should not be expected to do everything and expect nothing in return. The students must make the effort if they wish to obtain as much from the subject as possible.

The class need to put in the time to appreciate how the lecturer works, and exhibit some form of drive for learning, because no matter how good any lecturer may be, nothing will be gained if nothing is ventured. A student should try to provide constructive feedback, and to show that they are interested and willing to learn. The effectiveness of student input, coupled with the lecturer's desire for passing their knowledge onto the next batch of academics should make for a winning combination.

The discussed areas are likely just the tip of an iceberg of aspects of what makes a good lecturer, and I imagine most people will have their own ideas in mind for the attributes of their perfect lecturer, but hopefully I have touched upon some interesting areas for contemplation which may not have been considered before. I believe though, that with the qualities I have outlined above, alongside common sense and enthusiasm – not to forget being properly qualified for the position! – would help to mould an informative, valuable and respectable lecturer in my eyes.

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