The clock ticks slowly. You shift uncomfortably in your seat. Your concentration wanders, and you find yourself day dreaming about what it’d be like to have a real job and real money to spend instead of an overdraft. You will the clock to move faster, but somehow only succeed in slowing it down. And you’re only five minutes into the first lecture of the day…

Despite universities' best efforts, degrees can often fall flat. Just like a cake failing to rise, even when all the right ingredients are involved, that certain ‘je ne sais quoi’ seems to be missing. No matter how highly rated the department or how many hefty biology textbooks you immerse yourself in, somehow this hugely expansive and fascinating area of study fails to captivate. But if all the right ingredients are there, and the best equipment available, maybe it’s just a case of using a good recipe…

Take one cup of experience, mix with a big dollop of enthusiasm and stir with a well-humoured lecturer…

Lecturers can make or break a module, whether they like it or not! Experience is a prerequisite and certainly only someone who is thoroughly knowledgeable in their field will be able to earn the respect of their class. But without effective communication, this knowledge becomes obsolete. To command the attention of a class, a good sense of humour is vital, as is approachability, patience and reliability. A relaxed atmosphere helps students feel at ease, and a lecturer who is punctual and well prepared will gradually instil the same ethos into their students. Enthusiasm is also key to success. If a lecturer is truly passionate about their subject it becomes infectious, and can spread through a class faster than MRSA through the NHS! You can’t help but listen to an enthusiastic lecturer and when combined with knowledge, experience and a little humour can provide one of the most memorable learning experiences in university life.

Add several lab practicals and mix well by getting your hands dirty…

Labs can seem daunting at first. The prospect of spending hours and hours following protocols can seem overwhelming, but labs are often a great way to demonstrate a point, especially when they relate to us personally. Helping students to associate their studies with their own experiences makes for better understanding. Recently, we were lucky enough to map part of our own genome and with the help of research staff, establish our own ancestral history. It was truly fascinating and really enlivened our genomic studies. We all love getting our hands dirty, and by taking a ‘hands-on’ approach theories are better explained and easier to remember. Some of our most noteworthy practicals have involved live specimens and dissection, and certainly once you’ve artificially inseminated marine polychaete worms, you don’t forget it in a hurry.

Add a pinch of the unusual and a dash of the unexpected…

Utilising the unexpected and even so-called ‘shock tactics’, can break the daily humdrum of lectures and really make a point stand out. The use of the new and unusual is also a very effective tool in helping ideas and concepts stick in students minds. To demonstrate the use of alternatives to antibiotics, our microbiology lecturer brought in young live maggots (much to the horror of some members of the class) and free probiotic drinks. Students are certainly never known to turn down a
free drink, and after that lecture the whole field of alternative treatments seemed easier to visualise.

*For an extra exotic spicy taste, add field trips to far-flung places…*
Being able to see Biology in action is a dream come true for many students and provides a welcome change to lectures. By maximising students’ time in the field and their exposure to a range of different habitats and ecosystems, they are betterable to relate what they’re studying to the world around them. This can be a powerful tool indeed. In fact, many students who complete these field trips often continue the projects into their professional career. And with opportunities to study in such exotic destinations as Russia, the Bahamas, and even sunny Cornwall, we are well placed to escape the lecture theatre occasionally.

*Combine with a splash of opportunity, and serve with excellent career prospects…*
Biology degrees have a fundamental flexibility that sets them apart from other sciences. Being such an immense subject that covers hugely different areas, it is exponentially helpful to be able to specialise. The versatility that the degree provides means that every student has a unique learning experience, tailor made to their preferences and expertise. Consequently, this leads to a massively diverse range of careers to which a Biology degree can be applied. No longer are we confined to the microscope, and now many graduates go on to be lawyers, doctors, engineers, financiers, and journalists. This proves to be a massive motivation to learn.

Although quality ingredients are fundamental to a good learning experience, much more is needed to make a fantastic one. It is not merely the departmental resources or quality of teaching staff that makes a degree exceptional, but the extra touches of spice and individuality that can personalise studies and make them relative to peoples’ own experiences. As with life itself, a Biology degree needs to constantly evolve and adapt to meet the needs of its students. And like a good meal, it can completely awaken all of the senses. It can provide an enriching and fulfilling experience that just like a satisfying dinner, can provide enough intellectual sustenance for a memorable learning experience, and ultimately, a rewarding career.
Three tips for future space-makers

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The great difficulty with vocational degree courses concerned with preparing students for working with, contributing to and developing the contemporary built environment is the drawing/making gap. As we draw lines on a piece of tracing paper, do we truly understand the act of making that element? Do we have a feeling for the materials we are placing alongside one another? While there may be understanding of the theory of the jointing of materials, do students of the built environment know what it takes to make that joint?

As a student of architecture, I have come to the conclusion that architectural education must be supplemented with experience that can tackle this gap. The profession cannot grasp new technologies and material craft from behind the computer screen. This gap must be bridged in three ways.

First is to understand what it is that we draw when we put pen to paper. And the putting of pen to paper is essential. While computer modelling has plenty to commend it, the direct contact with the work, the immediacy of design, and the working through of construction problems is best done when each line must mean something as the ink is laid down. Here, again, education does not come from school, but has to be sought. So, here is Tip 1: Find a small practice of one or two architects/engineers and one computer to take you on for work experience for a period of a month or two. It must be a small practice, so that the student has contact with drawings, sites, clients and not simply the photocopier and the coffee maker. The agreement must be clear from the beginning: they are going to teach you to draw, and you are going to be as useful as possible, involved in the daily dealings of the practice. For a month, I sat for several hours a day at a drawing board beside the computer desk, and as the architect worked on the computer, he would, at the same time, teach me how to hold the pen, how to draw a line, how to tell different groups of people about the project through the drawing. I produced the working drawings for the builders, from the foundations layout, to the fireplace and porch details. Schools of Architecture do not teach you how to draw - it is up to the student to find out through a process of continually graphically representing their thoughts and examining the work of architects through publications. To be taught one on one by an architect gives the student a strong basis for going on with these rigorous investigations during their course.

Second is to understand “making” - the act of construction. This cannot be learnt from the drawing board, but from the use of the materials themselves. Touch, weigh, and feel. Then cut, grind, sand, drill, mould. Work with them. We come to Tip 2: Join the business of ‘making’ in the built environment, be it a joiner, blacksmith, bricklayer or plasterer - people who build the projects. This may mean labouring on a site, renovating a house, or working for a carpenter. Knowing how a material behaves enables you to perceive where it will or will not work in a project. I would describe this as essential information for the designer, project manager, surveyor and engineer. These jobs are not design orientated, but will influence how you design. The architect drawing the lines can become very detached from the physicality of what they are producing, so take it in your hands. We live in a tactile world, not just a visual bubble. I believe it to be the only way to produce truly great, relevant, contemporary architecture that works.

Thirdly, take charge of your own education and make it serve you. Opportunities arrive, or can be made, within what the student already does to tackle the drawing/making gap. A model has to be made. The project is an in-situ concrete structure. How should the model be made? I poured cement, mixed in buckets, into a wood and plastic formwork with wire reinforcement. Tip 3: Whenever you can, use the materials themselves, or use the making process that would be used for real. This is an amazing and exciting way of bridging that gap, and gives you invaluable insight
into the way builders create what you have drawn, the effort that is required, the inherent difficulties with materials, how to design to make these more easily coped with, and how to know when a scheme is truly daring.

It is crucial that we never forget that we are “space-makers”. However clean our suits, beautiful the drawings, virtuoso the results, the reality is a concrete-smeared plan and a hard-earned tea-break.
An old but effective teaching strategy to encourage critical thinking is the Socratic (or Maieutic) Method, which is focused on the teacher asking probing questions instead of shelling out answers. Students are induced to formulate latent concepts through a logical series of questions. A class in economics will include the study of abstract theoretical concepts that require the student to use his or her critical thinking skills. This method will help the student clarify his or her logical reasoning behind economic concepts and will better apply them to different economic situations. I enjoy this type of teaching tactic because it keeps the other students and I engaged in the subject.

However, in order for the method to work, a well-trained instructor is needed. Teachers need to know how to direct the discussion, select constructive answers, and periodically summarise what has been learned. A major issue for students, in any subject, is that teachers often present the subject matter in a dull, monotonous, and/or stale manner. The teacher may have used PowerPoint to add visuals to the lecture, but the software program lacks in personality. The responsibility of the teacher to educate effectively lies in the enthusiasm, charisma, and/or sheer interest when he or she delivers a presentation. I would advocate a programme to teach the teachers how to teach.

I have found that the more contact I have with the lecturer, the more I am able to learn. Total classroom lecture hours in the United Kingdom are shorter compared to the United States. In an eleven-week semester in the UK, one average economics class requires about 27.5 hours of direct contact with a lecturer. In a ten-week quarter in the US, the same class requires about 48 hours of direct contact with a lecturer. That is, students in the US spend 74.5 percent more time with a lecturer than students in the UK. Although the United States takes a different approach to university education, the amount of direct contact with the instructor significantly impacts the amount of information a student is able to obtain.

Teachers should draw from current sources, such as academic journals or the news, to explain economic concepts. An article in the Financial Times could draw information from the Bank of England and report a change in the economy that can spur business to respond in particular ways. An annual report of a multinational corporation could be discussed to figure out why the business decided to stop production of a particular product. Both macro and microeconomics could be taught from an article or report such as these. Current data makes the economic concepts relevant and useful, which is more intellectually satisfying than learning about disproved or outdated economic concepts that can be perceived as being irrelevant and useless.

Since economics studies the behaviour of social systems such as markets, business, parliament, and families, economics students need to better understand what effects policies may have on each system. I have found that using programmes that simulate the economy are great tools for learning because they can, in an educational sense, forecast what might happen in the future. With the programme, I am able to observe the effects of several economic policies at one time.

Human behaviour plays an important role in economics because it identifies the motivations behind many economic endeavours. When teachers lecture on human behaviour, I better understand the role of the human psyche, motivation, incentives, and deviance. The main idea is that rational economic decisions vary from rational human decisions. The study of economics observes the allocation of scarce resources, then tries to find ways to maximise benefits and minimise waste. A more comprehensive analysis of human behaviour would prove to be very useful in explaining how humans allocate these scarce resources (in the real world) and how the allocation might counter fundamental economic theories.
One essay at the end of the semester cannot possibly cover all that should be learned in an economics class. If students learn how to pass the essay or final exam, then they do not have to bother learning anything else. It sometimes becomes commonplace for students to take the path of least resistance. I believe that it would benefit the students to have small periodic assignments throughout the class to refresh what has been learned and reinforce newly learned concepts.

In summary, what makes the best learning experience for me is when the lecturer includes me in the discussion and challenges me to think critically. I respond better to the subject when the lecturer is well rehearsed, presents effectively, and is lively. When the subject matter is current, it helps me to better associate the concepts with the real world. The more contact I have with lecturers, the more I learn. An emphasis on technology, through simulations, prepares me better for the future. A more complete understanding of human behaviour allows me to better understand society. And finally, periodic assignments strengthen my ability to retain the newly acquired information.
What makes the best learning experience for an Education student?

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“What the World is a better place because it contains human beings who will give up ease and security in order to do what they themselves think is worth doing. They do the useless, the noble, divinely foolish and very wisest things that are done by man. And what they prove to themselves and to others is that man is no mere creature of his habits, no automaton of his routine, but that in the dust of which he is made there is also fire, lighted now and then by great winds from the sky.”

Walter Lipman (1939)

Our lives consist of a constant, unceasing struggle between our need for security, for the ‘known’ and the ‘understood’, and our need to experience life in all its scary and exhilarating forms. Whilst we may continually retreat to hibernate in our comfortable, regulated lives, we must equally face up to the unavoidable and inescapable necessity of regularly venturing beyond the safe, to “feed of the rat”1 of our desires. True education should empower the learner to embrace this essential dichotomy of life and to welcome all the learning opportunities that flow from truly living…

In considering what makes for the optimal learning experiences for education students, one must first consider what constitutes the best learning experiences per se. To understand this we need to travel back in time to a damp, dank Yorkshire cave in the early 1980s, where a party of school children are being initiated in the ‘delights’ of pot holing. Most of the party has successfully navigated the “cheese-press”, a squeeze hole about 3 metres long and 30 cm high, for which, in order to pass through, one must wriggle and push and stretch, resisting the thoughts of the thousands of tonnes of rock pressing down on the scratch, scratch, scratching helmet…. One young girl is stuck. Blubbering quietly she can’t (or won’t) go forwards and yet a stubborn resistance (do we hear the scuttling of a hungry rat along the passageway?), prevents her from going back. Fortunately she is not alone in her dilemma. Encouraging words float through the dark towards her…. “Just a few more centimetres, Wendy, you can do it….don’t worry, I’m here for you.” The rat inches closer, the wall of rock presses harder….a decision has to be made. The outcome? Is irrelevant. Perhaps the little girl squeezes forward and pops out to the cheers of her classmates in the echoing dark? Or maybe the rat goes hungry as the not so intrepid would-be explorer retreats in the face of fear? What IS important is the challenge, the choice and the supportive guide.

The best learning experiences are learner lead. Or are they? The little girl was allowed to decide for herself the outcome of her situation and the lesson learned was all the more powerful as a result of her having had this control. However, it was not the little girl’s decision to be in the squeeze hole in the first place. Parents and teachers and political pedagogy had lead to her being there and the choices pertaining to her were around how best to deal with the situation she found herself in.

Learning experiences should reflect this fluctuating seat of power. Choice we may often have, to embrace a challenge and a change or to turn away, but, more often than not, we are bound up in powers and movements beyond our control and “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”2

There is no fundamental difference between “educators” (or those aspiring to be so) and the “educated”. We are all on our ‘learning journey’ and the principles of ‘fun, safe, learning’ that apply to nursery children equally apply to students of higher education establishments, the only difference being the level and extent to which we are able to challenge ourselves.
In order that we may fully appreciate what makes for the best learning experience for an education student, we must now fast forward 20 years to the present day, to a cold, crisp January morning in Glasgow. Muffled against the cold, but warmed by the winter sun’s promise of spring, students stream into the lofty classrooms of the university, anxious to arrive on time, to make a good impression, to learn from their illustrious tutors. In one corner of the campus, however, a rather radical situation is unfolding. Students arriving at room 44 find the furniture rearranged, soothing music playing in the background and home-made baking by the door. They are invited to “make themselves comfortable”, before being encouraged to engage in chatting with their neighbour! Confusion further reigns when the tutor, having introduced herself, asks the students what they would like to learn for the next six weeks! The class continues in a similar vein. The students are encouraged to take over the facilitation of the session, to chair a debate of their peers and to act out learning situations in smaller focus groups. There is much hilarity and at times it appears that the tutor has lost control. At other times there is dissent within the group as some appear to find the approach just a bit too liberating. But the overall result? High attendance, high motivation and happy, enthusiastic learners. And the rat? Well, he just loves sticky toffee pudding!

In conclusion, it is essential that we as educators are open and committed enough to put ourselves through the exact same process upon which we expect others to embark: one of challenge, change and growth. Education should be a liberation of the mind and a transformation of the soul, both for the learner and the ‘learn-ed’. We are, however, only human and as such will often fail to grasp life’s opportunities to empower ourselves and others. At other times situations will conspire against us and we will have to live with the card that has been dealt us, but the best educational experiences are those that teach us that there is greatness in striving in spite of the barriers and in spite of the risks:

“...Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.”

Robert Frost

1 From the book by climber A. Alvarez of the same title.
What makes the best learning experience for an Engineering student?

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Before the question as to what makes the best learning experience for an engineering student can be answered, it is first necessary to determine what constitutes a learning experience. Is it attending lectures and being taught how to perform highly complex calculations? Is it the recognition and subsequent correction of one’s mistakes in a design project? Or is it the observation and participation in everyday work on site or in a design office? It could be argued that learning encompasses all of these and many other examples. As such they collectively form the basis of learning, which is to be informed, to gain knowledge and to improve by example. In this essay I aim to identify, and more importantly, justify what I perceive to be the best learning experience for an engineering student.

Learning is about developing essential skills in order to go on and practice in industry professionally. Knowledge, understanding, application and experience describe this best. All engineers need knowledge and understanding to go about their daily business in the future, so the elements of taught learning that a university provides as part of an engineering education are crucial. However, I believe the manner in which they are often delivered does not constitute the best learning experience, though many departments are seeking new ways of delivering material. Far more important is the ability to apply this toolbox of knowledge and understanding to varied situations. This is something that cannot be taught but must be learnt, and is an area where the responsibility falls directly on the student to involve themselves in activities in order to gain the experience. It is the experience of doing something that constitutes the learning rather than just being shown how to do it.

Whatever one’s particular preference it can be argued that the best learning experience is gained by having a good all round education, balancing a mixture of information capture, observation, experiment, application and practice. Importantly, it should also be realised that when it comes to identifying what is the best experience, then it is often down to individual tastes and predilections and, as such, it is impossible to identify a single learning experience that constitutes the best for all students. My opinion, which is often reflected amongst my peers, is that participating in any activity ‘hands-on’ is the best way to learn. I believe that any interactive learning experiences, be that lab work, design projects, site visits, field trips or work placements are the best learning experiences for any engineering student. Engineering is after all a practical subject, in which learning is gained through experience rather than just absorbing knowledge.

My views are drawn from three summer vacation placements with civil engineering companies, both contractors and consultants, along with 3½ years at university. During these placements I have spent time both on site and in the design office and feel that the experiences afforded me have offered both the best insight in terms of my future career work and been the most beneficial learning experiences in terms of real-world engineering knowledge gained. That is not to say that attending one of the world’s top academic institutions is not forcing me to learn things, far from it. It is just that I feel that in terms of a learning experience, the engineering I have done outside the classroom has offered more towards my future career. However, I still believe that universities play a major role in progressing learning. Students should not only understand how to do things in practical terms with today’s knowledge but should be able to develop the next generation of theories and models. Many institutions are trying to incorporate some practical engineering learning experiences into their courses, without losing too much of the essential background material that is vital to the development of engineering.

Imperial College’s Civil Engineering department has developed the concept of a ‘Constructionarium’ in which third year students participate after exams. It is marketed as a
"building to learn" exercise. The essential aim is to enable students to gain familiarity with the various elements of running a construction project on site. The students are divided into groups, each tasked with constructing a scale version of a real-life project. They have to manage deliveries, monitor costs, complete risk assessments and method statements and operate a hierarchical management structure as would be seen on a normal construction site. The aim of the project is to prepare students for work after university, something that was thought to be lacking previously. In this respect it succeeds in providing a good learning experience to those students who have not had the opportunity to experience such work as a summer placement. It even gives valuable management experience to those who are not even planning on working in engineering, experience such as team dynamics, delegation and roles. For example, I learnt a lot about team-working and aspects of site management, which I had only had the chance to observe on my placements. The whole experience only confirmed further that I wanted to pursue a career in civil engineering.

Importantly, engineering is by its very nature a constant learning experience. With the rules and regulations that govern its practice constantly changing and the theory that holds much of it together always under review, learning for an engineer effectively never stops until the day he or she retires. As an engineering student one is just starting upon the continual process of learning. The experience gained during the first few years is crucial to developing enthusiasm for continued learning after graduation and the knowledge level with which a student goes into practice. Obviously the taught academic side of learning is very important but it is the other opportunities and environments that a student can get involved in which many would quote as being their most beneficial experience. Actually ‘doing’ engineering is seen by many as the best way of reinforcing any theoretical material.

I would therefore argue that all engineering students need to be taught the theory behind whatever discipline they are studying. This should not be sacrificed in order to attract more students, to the detriment of future projects. However, in order that students can learn, as well as being taught, opportunities should be made available both within university and, where possible, in industry, for students to experience engineering at first hand. It is these experiences that have proved to be the best learning experiences for this civil engineering student.
What make a good Geography lecturer?

‘What makes the best learning experience for a student in Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences?’

Rob Marten
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Carabiner clips fastened to the belt. Beard. Map. Moustache. Cycling to the campus. None of these things make a good geography lecturer. They may, however, make a bad geography lecturer feel better. This ‘answer’ may read a little more like a journal than an academic essay. I’m not trying to be radical, but it makes more sense that way. A formally written essay isn’t always appropriate, especially not for such a personal account. I’m not referencing academic literature; I’m telling what happens in my world, using examples to illustrate what teaching and learning techniques have worked well for me over the last two and half years.

A good geography lecturer imposes their personality upon the topic, without explicitly imposing his/her views upon their audience. There’s nothing worse than coming away feeling like you’ve just seen a party political broadcast. We (and I say ‘we’, though you can scrub yourself out at will) should be taken on a journey and shown the different deviations the path takes, not forced down them, but offered a…wait for it…map to show where they might lead. Whoa, don’t get excited. I’m not going to mention maps again. Simon vs. Elhrich, to use a popularly taught example, should be presented like an intellectual boxing match that we can sit back and watch with a Ginsters and a can of Coke. That way we might be tempted to dip into both texts, not just back one horse. Horses boxing? I’ll stick to one metaphor at a time, perhaps.

Back to the imposition of personality. This semester a lecturer was describing the poor conditions of agricultural workers in West Africa; “they have a hard life…a bit like you students…” followed by the bellowing of…“ONLY YOU DON’T DIE WHEN IT DOESN’T RAIN!”. We laughed. We laughed because of the way it was delivered. A change of pace that even Kelly Holmes would have been proud of. But it was a hard-hitting point. And so I’ll remember that lecture come the summer. Such changes in pace and tone may seem relatively insignificant, but like all stage performances, it’s all in the delivery.

This idea of a stage performance is important; they’re not called lecture theatres for nothing! Even the most mundane topic can be made interesting. I remember a first year lecturer who had two different projections of notes on the go, as well as drawing diagrams on acetate. He moved around the equipment like a gym workout. And it kept us interested. Another example: Last year I was lucky enough to see the debut lecture of young member of staff. He was very animated, used the occasional blue word, and, at one point he showed us some old film clips to demonstrate a point about changing architectural styles. People at the back nudged the ones kipping and we were captivated until the end. I spoke to one of his PHD students a few months later, who told me the lecturer had been “sh**ting himself about it” before hand. But it was great. It was a new style of delivery. It was a learning experience. And it worked. It must have taken hours to achieve the fluidity he did, with the film clips set up in the right place and so forth. It was a show. This is a far cry from the old “hang on a minute whilst I buzz IT to get them to put this PowerPoint thingy from this thing onto this thing so I can start”; something that is all too familiar for so many of us.

If the performance is nailed then we’re on to a winner. But what helps is the ability, or rather the chance, to engage with the lecturer. One particular lecturer this year keeps asking us “am I going through this too fast?” and “do you know this bit, shall I move on…?" and similar questions that at first we thought were rhetorical, but soon came to realise that he was actually waiting until people nodded, grunted, or, even, heaven forbid, spoke.
Learning techniques. *Pedagogies.* This brings me on to my final example; something that has compelled me to write this journal. A third year module that finished at Christmas changed everything I thought I knew about, not only geography, but about learning as a process. The following is an excerpt from my final assessed journal from that module:

“I’m beating myself up about coffee. I should sue the uni. I talked about ‘voting in the isles’ in journal 3 because Sainsbury’s had become like a polling booth for me. And the manifestos I’d heard in the election campaigns (re: semester) were both equally as bad…so I didn’t vote at all. What sort of mega-consumer am I now? There are no good/bad decisions if there are so many facets to both. Binary opposites are bad. Not good. Haha. Made myself chuckle. Now, tall guy, that’s why I’ve gone mad. I’ve become depoliticised because I know too much, and, paradoxically, that knowledge is that I know nothing at all. It’s not the tall guy’s fault I’ve gone mad. Far from it. The tall guy’s just another cog in the machine, an actor in the web. Whether I took this course or not, I’d still be affecting people in some way or another – I just wouldn’t have thought about it so much. I’m still a mega consumer. I’m linked to gazillions of usually unseen others. I know I’m making a difference in whatever action I take. But I don’t know how to control it. I felt powerful when I had no knowledge at all. Now I have information. And I don’t know if that equates to knowledge or not. knowledge = power? I’m not so sure.”

‘And this is geography’?!’…I hear you say. Yes it is. It’s the end product of a different type of learning. We indulged in cyborg pedagogy for a term. We sat in a circle. The lecturer (referred to as ‘tall guy’ in the excerpt) walked around the edge of the circle. We were not allowed to talk to him. Or look at him. We could only talk to our fellow students. We talked about the *geographies of material culture* and our relationships with previously unseen others. We read outside the class and met with groups to share our readings, and then shared those collated readings with a new group in the class. We wrote four non-academic journals about our life, not too dissimilar to what you’re reading now, only with academic footnotes putting our lives in the context of academic discourse. We were encouraged to share our ideas with the lecturer in his extensive office hours; subsequently he had queues outside for hours. He offered us a new style of learning, and I truly believe that this particular topic, and its aim to make us think about the consequences of every little action we take, could not be tackled so effectively with more a more conventional approach.

Without doubt, it’s the single most beneficial academic experience I will take away with me in to the big wide world.

And just as that big wide world is changing, so is geography as a taught discipline, and its lecturers need to mirror that change with their own dynamics. And I think for the most part they are.

Innovative techniques are indeed beneficial, but perhaps most importantly of all; as long as a lecturer keeps his/her door a-jar then they can sport all the carabiner clips, facial hair and cycling equipment that they so desire! Us students need to feel that we come first, and a lecturer’s research comes second. Even if that’s not always the case!
From the outside, Computer Science is often viewed as some kind of bizarre degree course which involves a selection of greasy males sitting in a room and programming all day. While it is inescapably true that the subject is quite maledominated, it is unfair to assert that all of them are greasy. More importantly, however, it is not the case that computer scientists spend their entire student life programming. The essence of the degree is, in fact, based in a solid theoretical background, which simply cannot be ignored.

It is the comprehensive understanding of computer theory, coupled with a sharp mind and the ability to think beyond the immediate situation, that allows the informed computer scientist to be a force to be reckoned with. It is unfortunate, however, that learning the theory is generally regarded as a boring and thankless task that simply has to be done. The result is that few people are inclined to pay full attention to the lectures on theory, and end up applying unsound practices to their work. This is clearly undesirable. Thus, it is the purpose of this essay to identify some tactics which might hold the key to an award-winning Computer Science lecture.

The first step is to understand what "a good Computer Science lecture" actually means. From the lecturer's perspective, it can be defined as one where the students appear to be interested in what is going on, and come away from it having learned something. From a student's perspective, it might be defined as one which was enjoyable and memorable, and was not a complete waste of time. The latter is a difficult criterion to satisfy, as students tend to regard anything which stops them from sleeping as a potential waste of their time. As a general rule, a lecture can be regarded as a good use of a student's time if they feel that it has taught them something. Thus, it would seem that the lecturer's goals and those of the intended audience overlap, and so a "good lecture" is likely to satisfy all parties.

It can be argued that the best way to ensure someone learns a concept is to present it to them in a memorable way. A fresh situation causes the brain to pay more attention, and also causes a link to be made between the concept being taught and the memory of the event.

One simple illustration of such a technique drawn from personal experience is the use of children's blocks as a visual aid to represent elements in a stack or queue. While stacks and queues are both fairly simple concepts in themselves, presenting them visually cements the idea firmly in people's minds, and offers an easy way to show how the structures can be manipulated without the students having to juggle the elements around in their own heads. The novelty factor also plays an important role in ensuring that the concept does not easily fade away once the lecture is over, as mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

Student interaction is also an important part of a memorable, enjoyable lecture. What better way to gain confidence than to see one's own input cause a positive output?

As an example, consider a course which teaches the principles of programming. The lecturer can write a program over the course of a whole lecture, or even a set of lectures, with the help of the students. With everyone working towards the same goal and achieving small successes every step of the way, the lectures become enjoyable and rewarding to attend.

If the context of the program is seen as something interesting or unusual, this also works in the favour of the lecturer. I attended a lecture in which we were presented with a data structure representing a "blood donor" type. Each blood donor would be instantiated with a certain quantity of blood, and had a "take blood" method which reduced the amount of blood they had. If the result
of this method was that the donor ran out of blood, they would utter some last words and become registered as dead. This could be resolved, however, by calling a method to give them a cup of tea. Correctly predicting these results is satisfying in itself, but the amusing context in which the results are presented also helps to affirm the experience as a positive one, and thus ensures that the lessons learned are not easily forgotten.

The examples presented here point to a greater overall idea of the key ingredient of a good lecture: imagination. Solutions to hard problems all too often seem so bizarre and contrived that they cause wonder and amazement that someone imagined them into existence. By adding a dimension of reality to a lecture and fitting abstract concepts into known situations and environments, the imagination is stimulated. Not only does this make ideas easier to understand by reducing them to something already known, but it also encourages the students to use their imagination again when faced with an unknown problem in the future.

Having spent over three years in university, I have met some very intelligent people, and the factor I have identified which they all seem to have in common is their imagination. This is apparent both in the way they view everyday objects and situations, and their approach to problem solving. They are always looking for alternative ideas and explanations to those which are presented in front of them. This leads to problems being solved in surprising ways. It is certain that this kind of behaviour can only be further encouraged by a lecture style which makes people relate new ideas and situations to those which are not so unfamiliar. However, it is by making the experience enjoyable, and thus memorable, that causes the ideas to remain with the student and allow them to look for ways to employ them in practice.
What makes the best learning experience for students of Languages, Linguistics or Area Studies?

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To answer this question, we need first to ask some further questions. What should a language student be able to do after ‘the best learning experience’? Speak fluently, if inaccurately? Write with perfect style, but be nervous of mistakes while speaking? Or just be able to say, honestly, that they love learning the language? And is it ever fair to say that grammatical accuracy and organic fluency in a language are mutually exclusive? Moreover, in trying to define the ‘best’ learning experience, should we focus on the most enjoyable one, or the one where most vocabulary or grammatical structures are learnt?

The central factor governing language learning is learner motivation, and the best language learning will arise only when teachers and students dedicate time and interest. No matter how talented the teacher, or how wonderful the facilities, if learners don’t want to learn a language, they won’t! But while it is difficult to motivate uninterested students, I suggest that the initial responsibility for a good learning experience lies with teachers: a fun, student-centred approach, based on students’ interests and learning styles, will both boost exam performance, and also provide the best learning experience.

In the best language experience of all - children learning their native tongue - we see that the greatest motivation is a desire for meaningful communication: children learn language to express themselves. In a classroom, meaningful communication can be promoted in two ways: through the choice of topics, and the choice of materials. Learners will be more motivated if they choose their own topics – or choose from topics suggested by a teacher. Why focus on recycling habits when you can learn the same structures talking about shopping habits? This is not dumbing-down, but makes learning interesting, and is vital for learners at all levels. Indeed, if someone asked me, for example, to talk in English about a favourite sports team, I would be hard pressed to say anything. Ask me to do the same in another language, and my reticence will soon turn to boredom and frustration.

An emphasis on (edited) authentic materials gives exposure to natural language models, and also has an obvious practical application. Furthermore, it is always more motivating if activities are personal, and linked to the foreign culture. I covered the topic of food several times, and the most memorable approach involved discussing which foods we liked and tasting the foods of the other country (bringing chocolate into a classroom environment naturally works wonders for concentration). Another factor to consider is that successful learning requires variety. Learners need activities to cover all four language skills and also to accommodate different learning styles. Thus for me, an auditory learner, my knowledge of the future tense in Italian derives less from the hours of grammar classes I sat through, than from a pop song we listened to once in a class.

The vocabulary, phrases, or grammar structures I have most accurately retained have been those learned while having fun. When relaxed, your learning barriers are lower than when nervous. Thus, having forgotten much of the French I learnt, I can indeed still recite parts of the body from the song ‘Alouette’- sung once by a teacher in a bird costume! This is in contrast to much forgotten vocabulary on any number of topics that I dutifully learnt each week for tests. Indeed, the role of assessment and feedback is also vital. For example, simply setting a list of vocabulary for a test is common, but it would be far better for students to perform role-plays using the same vocabulary in a context. More than other subjects, language skills develop continuously and are far more suited to assessment in quizzes or informal chats than a single final exam where a bad mark can demotivate and make students scared of continuing.
Obviously the ideal place to learn a language is the country itself, with an obvious motivation, and relaxed situations in which to learn. Some of these advantages can be extended to classes anywhere, and were exemplified in one weekly German class. Coffee breaks were central to the class; the teacher came along, and was happy to lengthen them if we were speaking German— if we spoke anything else, we were threatened with immediate grammar exercises! Encouraging students to stick vocabulary/grammar cards up around the home and bring German into everyday life extended this environment. Moreover, rather than receiving homework at the end of the class, we were emailed a short grammar exercise or article every day or two. This encouraged us to make time for language within the week, and made us feel that we should mirror the teacher’s extra effort. Even if time and money don’t make a daily class possible the development of Blackboard websites and e-learning has made the old language mantra ‘little but often’ even easier.

While these suggestions may seem at odds with traditional, text-book based learning, I am not suggesting that people should (or can) learn languages simply by listening to Italian pop music or reading *Vogue* in French. In helping others to learn English I now see even more the importance of a solid approach to grammar. Toddlers may appear to learn native grammar by osmosis, but I have met no older learners of foreign languages who don’t desire simple explanations of grammar rules and repeated practice of them. For while grammar can be concealed in songs or topics chosen by learners, most learners become frustrated at their inability to express what they want to without some separate grammar explanation and practice. Thus grammar still plays a vital role in facilitating communication and motivating learners.

In conclusion, I suggest that the best language learning experience enables students to confidently express things relevant to them, and have receptive skills appropriate to their level. This acquisition of skills is directly tied to a student’s enthusiasm and love of the language. Simply put, an uninterested student who has no fun will not acquire language skills and will have no language learning experience at all, let alone the *best* one. Rather, the best language learning experience will arise, even with students of limited initial motivation, if teachers and students choose relevant topics and activities, make grammar directly relevant to communication, and, above all, together cultivate an atmosphere of (controlled) fun in the classroom.
What makes a good Law teacher?

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College of Law
Law Subject Centre

The decision to study law is the type of decision you do not take lightly. From the start you are aware that it is hard work and a costly venture and at the end of it all there is no guarantee that you will get a job. Thus, one requires the utmost determination. The least one expects or needs is a law teacher who bores you to death and drains you of the enthusiasm you began with.

So what does make a good law teacher?

Inspire me…
The most important quality is the ability to inspire law students; to motivate them to continue when they cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. It is not very motivating to listen to a law tutor who has absolutely no enthusiasm for what they teach. The lack of enthusiasm becomes obvious through the tone and demeanour of law teachers. This lack of passion transfers to the students and they too begin to feel that it is too much of a bother to listen or even to study for the subject.

Inform me…
It is important to relate the theory to current issues. This helps students to understand the law better and relate it to the real world. Such awareness helps students to see how the law is changing and how it impacts on everyday life. Being kept up to date with current developments also helps future lawyers to predict what the law will be like when they qualify. In addition, it provides invaluable conversation topics for interviews.

Involve me…
Falling asleep during a law lecture is not unusual and nothing is better than being woken up by tutor who is trying to involve you. Actively involving students by asking questions and using students in examples or role-plays is an effective way of maintaining students' concentration. It encourages participation and helps one to remember points of law more clearly than one would if a tutor was just talking at you.

Impress me…
Visual aids do wonders when one is trying to remember excruciatingly complex points. One of my tutors was very fond of funny colourful pictures. What stuck in my head was the picture of a horse with red evil eyes; an aid to remembering the case of…(I can’t remember but it does work, really it does!). It is simple aids like these, which can trigger your memory in exams. Such aids also make the lecture fun as they add variety. They enable to you to use your senses effectively.

And sometimes bribe me…
One of my law contract lecturers offered Cadbury’s chocolates in return for correct answers to questions he would ask. This most certainly attracted my attention.

Simplify for me…
In addition it is certainly the simple things which make all the difference from teaching badly to teaching effectively. Clear outlines, simple diagrams and not over-complicating issues would most definitely aid effective teaching. It is common for law books to become more academic-theory type text books rather than practical - a good law tutor would instil enthusiasm within his/her students to read more about the academic arguments in their own time but would get the practical point across and not confuse students unnecessarily.
**Finally, exam time…**

Good planning is essential for a good law tutor. Finishing the course early enough to leave time for revision is essential. Having the time to ask questions about difficult topics, going over complex areas of law and exam techniques is vital. A good law tutor will be able to prepare his/her students thoroughly. A good law tutor would also set mock exams to help students to get used to writing within certain time limits and to write succinctly.

**Encourage…**

Most students who make a decision to study law understand the commitment and determination required. But it must be remembered that some may feel intimidated by their peers, all of whom (obviously, as they are doing law) are boffins; thus it is those who may need encouragement. It is therefore important for law tutors to have greater contact with their students in order to assess their individual needs. It may be perhaps only team work that is needed so that those who do feel intimidated do not also feel isolated and left to teach themselves. Thus, a good law tutor would encourage teamwork. This type of work would create a more a comfortable learning environment. Team work is also an important skill within the workplace and so this type of work would certainly earn a potential trainee much needed brownie points on application forms.

Overall, a law teacher should make you feel you are paying for quality. The weight of the loan on my shoulders would definitely be heavier if I emerge from my studies feeling that I was taught badly. Luckily for me I have no regrets.
What makes the best learning experience for a Materials student?

Eleanor Jay
Imperial College
Materials Subject Centre

In my experience there are a few key issues that help materials students to learn. Materials is an almost lost discipline that is not thoroughly understood, and consequently the numbers studying materials courses may be small. However, there is a growing need for materials graduates, be it in industry or in direct materials applications. Thus, materials students need encouragement and support throughout their entire degree, arguably more than other engineering or science disciplines.

One of the ways that this can be accomplished is to relate subject matter to industry and show how theory becomes practice. Ideas of future employment opportunities will also help materials not only to become acknowledged by the general public, but also to keep undergraduates motivated and provide a good learning environment. Practical experiments and work placements will also help to reaffirm the importance of course material to real life and industry. Active learning in laboratories is an important and useful way to cement ideas taught in theory in lectures. It helps to explain the relevance of what could, potentially, have been a very confusing and seemingly inconsequential lecture.

As the American theologian Tyron Edwards (1809-1894) once said:

‘The mediocre teacher tells, the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates but the greatest teacher awakens interest and kindles enthusiasm and this is the sure way to teach easily and successfully.’

Enthusiastic staff should also be one of the instruments employed to help create a great learning environment for students. A successful tutor is able to relay his or her passion for the subject in question and is able to deliver lectures in a way that makes the learning material accessible and interesting to all. This one thing could be the crux to all students’ learning needs.

Detailed feedback from assignments and coursework is also beneficial since it helps students to see where they have gone wrong and what they can improve upon. This includes things like worked examples to questions that can be followed and understood - after all, we all learn by our mistakes.

Provision of academic support such as tutorial groups and extra maths classes are especially important, since not all materials students find mathematics a strong point. The area of mathematics is one where most students seem to run into significant problems. Thus, additional help in this area would be deeply appreciated by all.

One of the main problems that materials students encounter is that technical language may be used in many lectures and laboratories during the period of the course. In view of the fact that many materials students are from overseas, this can cause a problem in understanding and can seriously hinder learning and enjoyment of the course. Thus to help these students a list of technical terms and explanations could be provided to clarify the terminology.

Occasionally teaching staff do not appreciate that there is a broad spectrum of working abilities, especially in subjects that are not prerequisite for materials and so only target their lectures at the more advanced student level. This is something that can be severely detrimental to the working morale of many students and could cause them to lose interest in the course and hence eventually to drop out.
In addition, few teaching staff are actually trained teachers. They are academics, with maybe pressing research matters, not able to donate much time to the eager student. They may not be able to communicate their ideas about the subject matter effectively, finding it difficult to comprehend why some harder topics are not understood. I therefore believe that it is essential that all teaching staff have some basic training so that the lecturer and student are able to communicate on a learning basis, thus aiding both alike.

However, there are mechanisms that can be put into place to solve many of the problems experienced by materials students. One of the main issues is to make the general public more aware of the materials discipline. With greater knowledge of materials, more funding could be appropriated and so this would directly benefit the working environment of all materials students. Also, more team work and year group bonding exercises would help to make sure that students would feel comfortable asking each other questions about parts of the course that maybe they do not totally understand. This would benefit both parties and would help the overall morale and course understanding of the year group.

More problem solving exercises would help put the theory behind many courses into practice. Better still, tutorials going over these problem sheets would aid the learning experience of materials students, especially since courses are quite practical and applying knowledge always makes learning more enjoyable.

Making resources more readily available is a very important issue to consider - even making books and computers easily accessible would help the learning of the students. Having increased funding and more work placements available to students would significantly enhance the enjoyment and hence the understanding of the students on the course.

In my opinion, materials students are a rare breed and need to be nurtured and aided in every way possible to enhance their learning environment and ability to enjoy and succeed at the course. After all the students of today are the inventors and pioneers of tomorrow, and it is in students’ hands that the populace must place their trust so that the great unrelenting work of previous generations is scrutinised and sustained.
What makes the best learning experience for a Performing Arts student?

Helen Crevel
PALATINE Subject Centre

Being a performing arts student is a curious thing. While outsiders will often tease you about doing a ‘doss’ subject, the hours you put into your work seems to leave a lot of the university crowd in the shade. Rehearsals, meetings, extra rehearsals, last minute rehearsals – and yet, somehow you don’t mind. One thing performing arts students tend to have in spades: passion for their subject!

That said, we artistic types still need guidance, and, like everyone else, can benefit from dynamic learning environments and fantastic teachers. We want to be self-motivated but all that passion needs to be channelled without restricting our creativity – in short, we want to be inspired. In my experience, many of the best teachers lead by example. Their love for the subject just can’t be suppressed and it is contagious! In an acting summer school, I was once taking part in a play called Daughters of Venice which, amongst other things, was about the music of Vivaldi. Playing musicians and singers, the play called for us to convey to an audience a world far removed from our own. This was a huge leap, which we were all finding difficult to take. In one rehearsal, our director simply burst into fervent operatic song. We were speechless but suddenly we got it. For one brief moment we found ourselves in a lyrical seventeenth-century Venice. We understood our play. We took the leap.

However, it is not just the teachers who support and inspire us in our learning and development as artists. Throughout my experiences as a theatre student I have developed ever increasing respect for the group dynamic found from working with and around others like myself. ‘Bouncing’ ideas off people who are open to them and then watching them ‘snowball’ into something to be deservedly proud of has been one of the most exciting and fulfilling aspects of the work I have done so far. Fellow students have helped in even more than this though, as one criticism I have often felt over the years of lecturers and teachers in the performing arts is that they can be extremely harsh. While we all want to be challenged, coming up against too much of this can brutally undermine your self-confidence. Self-belief is incredibly important for the risks we need to take in order to create worthwhile work and while sometimes being ‘torn apart’ can help us to learn, we still need to be put back together. This is where the support of my peers has been so crucial. Innumerable times, groups I have worked in have been there to reassure each other and we have all been strengthened as students and people as a result.

In the end though it is all down to you – the student, indeed the person – to make your learning experience a valuable one in the time you are given. Being given opportunities and support is fundamental but it is also up to you to take what is offered in addition to seeking out more. And there is no better time to start doing this than at university. I have never experienced a more charged and varied environment than during my two and half years in the melting pot of life at university. So the advice I have to offer other performing arts students is to be as open as possible – not just in class, but in life. Art is often described as a reflection of life, and however debatable that might be there is no denying that ideas and inspiration are all around us if we only look for them. In politics, the other arts, emotions, everyday people and events, in the ordinary, the extraordinary – potential for art is everywhere and it is our responsibility to think ‘outside the box’ and push (sometimes dare) ourselves to take the risks of creating something different. That is what keeps us growing as artists and this should persist for as long as we continue to produce art.
What makes the best learning experience for a student in the Physical Sciences?

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University of Bath
Physical Sciences Subject Centre

The criteria of 'success' of an undergraduate in a learning environment, can be deemed very different to that of an academic. Often modern students are only concerned with exam grades, coursework marking criteria and, ultimately, degree classification. Academics however, strive to teach in an environment where they can develop critical understanding, meaningful interest and subject orientated motivation. This essay aims to justify that the acquisition of a deeper interest of a chemistry undergraduate in their studies can be fashioned to increase motivation, amplify understanding, and hence feasibly determine success - by all definitions.

Context based learning is a proven strategy for developing these required interests. It is an especially successful tool in overcoming what has been dubbed as the 'maths problem'. The maths problem has been recognised as affecting the UK university physical sciences intake for almost 10 years. It is created by the declining quality and quantity of chemistry undergraduates, who arrive at university with weakened maths abilities. This is a critical problem when the understanding of physical chemistry requires a concrete background in calculus and students cannot even tackle simple algebraic rearrangements of \( PV = nRT \).

As a final year Natural Sciences student majoring in Chemistry, I have experienced many disciplines within (and also importantly outside of) the physical science network. It has been interesting to critically evaluate different teaching methods and learning environments over three years. It has been evident that portraying enthusiasm within a subject is not always successful, resisting assessment based motivation cannot always be possible, and attempting to remove misconceptions in understanding can certainly prove challenging. However, using these indispensable experiences, it was possible to test the three year evaluation, and attempt to make a difference to the 'maths problem' by creating 'Pharmacokinetics for Chemists'.

Pharmacokinetics for Chemists is a workshop based learning tool that was developed as part of my undergraduate research project, and targeted second year students on the 'chemistry for drug discovery' program at the University of Bath. The aim of the material was to "provide mathematical tutoring at the expense of chemical kinetics problems, where problems are set into real life context of chemistry to provide interest, application and realisation for the necessity of the use of mathematics within chemistry".

The target group study pharmacology as part of their degree, which deems pharmacokinetics as a superior context for developing a greater understanding of kinetics and maths. The workshops that consisted of straightforward mathematics questions, accompanied by problem based learning tasks were piloted with 10 students at the university. The experience of personally teaching the pilot sessions was an insight into how students react to such material. The development of the workshops, and hence the teaching, fundamentally relied on empathy – which was effortless as the students were not in a dissimilar position to mine.

Pleasingly, participation was high, even though timetabled workshops were not compulsory. Maths, kinetics, and pharmacology questions were answered well; even though no reference was made to the material being assessed. Discussion of material was avid, even though sessions were guided by a peer undergraduate, not an academic. Feedback comprised of comments including: enjoyment, relevance to the degree, sound understanding of new kinetics principles, and increased appreciation of core maths techniques.
The practise of an undergraduate teaching other chemists can create a practical insight into how other students learn, which can in turn provide incentive for learning in new ways, for either party. It is this kind of ‘peer’ taught experience that can create learning experiences invaluable to undergraduates as, arguably; students will learn best from those who are closest to them in experience.

This kind of environment is an illustration of how providing alternative learning experiences can benefit students that find it difficult to productively gain from lecturing. Being in a small group can increase student confidence and learning whilst answering questions can be more beneficial than being exposed to reams of information. It is important however not to restrict the openness of a question. Within the pilot workshops, it was evident that the problems enabled plenty of discussion, meaning weaker students could learn from the stronger, and all students could benefit from different ideas or methods of answering questions.

The pharmacokinetics workshops I created may not provide a formidable solution to the maths problem but material of this type can successfully attempt to help physical science students overcome their negative attitudes towards maths, practise important techniques and see the significance of such techniques to their subject. If maths support or tuition is provided in the right context, a chemist's interest can be gained, and effective learning strategies for overcoming the quandaries of the maths problem are feasible.

Contextual learning experiences allow undergraduates a vacation from “how much it counts towards their degree” and create a new facility for greater ‘out-of-the-box’ discussion of their subject, with peers, or merely each other. It can provide a compromise between assessment and learning which ideally, if applied with commitment, will result in increased enjoyment. Enjoyment will lead to interest and interest, as discussed, will augment motivation. It is also a vehicle for encouraging independent learning, as by capturing interests through embedded themes and by providing resources, students can be stimulated to study outside of the regular course restraints.

Independence is vital to success at degree level - a final year research project is the evidence. The things I have learnt from researching a problem, developing a solution and teaching in practise, are extensions of basic key skills gained in first and second year. By embedding individual explorations like this in core degree modules, students would be able to gain a deeper understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, outside of static summative assessment.

Successful learning experiences are determined by critical understanding and, whichever way this is achieved (by contextualising difficulties, implementing step by step understanding, or through independent study), misconceptions can be removed, motivations increased and, in an ideal world, academics can be satisfied in the fact students are being stimulated by the right kind of success.
What Makes a Good Philosophy Lecturer?

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While Pablo Picasso and Michelangelo used different techniques, it is generally acknowledged that each produced what is instantly and almost universally recognisable as high quality art. Lecturing, too, is an art which might be said to depend for its effectiveness on the skills, personality and background of the lecturer. Good lecturers may vary as widely as their methods of presentation, but nonetheless certain features are common to all good lecturing. Knowledge of the subject, good organisational skills, clarity of speech, well structured material, few distinctive and distracting mannerisms, and good eye contact are to be commended in any lecturer and good lecturers are likely to employ many of these characteristics, but for a university discipline as demanding as Philosophy more is needed.

Perhaps the most obvious requirement is enthusiasm. No matter how knowledgeable a lecturer is in his field, if he is unable to convey his enthusiasm to his students his lectures will lack this essential ingredient. In allowing his enthusiasm to show he does not claim to be omniscient, and may well allow that there are parts of the topic about which he finds it difficult to form strong opinions. This may be because his research is at the edge of the current debate or because it is a topic about which it is difficult to draw conclusions since the arguments presented appear to offer different, though equally valid solutions. How should one balance the needs of society for security in their daily lives against the needs of the criminal? Is rehabilitation within the community preferable to locking a criminal up in what has sometimes been called ‘the University of Crime’?

Learning ‘parrot fashion’ what philosophers have written may give students knowledge of what is in the prescribed texts, but good Philosophy lecturers encourage students to put forward their own ideas, to challenge the wisdom of even the most respected of philosophers. When this is done, sometimes through having short breaks in the lectures, ideas which appear fresh to the students are discussed and such discussions can become the source of animated debate in coffee rooms or bars. That is doing Philosophy and to encourage that should surely be an aim for lecturers. Student ‘away weekends’ or day conferences where students and staff alike present papers and then mingle socially develop this further.

For this intercommunication to be stimulated the good Philosophy lecturer should enjoy his students. This would entail his appearing to be on the same level and not, metaphorically speaking, on a podium. Just as the good parent gains much pleasure and enjoyment from his children who misuse language while yet ensuring that the child learns to use words in their proper context, so the good Philosophy lecturer should enjoy the ‘gaffs’ his students make and use them to encourage a deeper knowledge. When I consider the educational attainments of, and publications by, the staff in this university and appreciate that some of them are in the vanguard of current research, their modesty and approachability never fail to amaze me. They are good lecturers.

Within a university a lecturer does need to be approachable. No matter how lucid the contents of a lecture may seem to be to the lecturer, there are times when the material is just too difficult to be grasped by all students. Sometimes, in a subject such as logic, a good lecturer may help to overcome difficulties by some trick such as the introduction into the lecture of some lateral thinking questions which, though apparently not entirely relevant, create a relaxed creative thinking atmosphere. When even this fails, it is helpful if the lecturer is willing to meet students on a ‘one-to-one’ basis so that the individual, perhaps shy, student can be helped to resolve the difficulty and the good lecturer will build time into his schedule for this.
One of the major difficulties in a university seems to be the amount of reading to be covered. The good lecturer will be aware of this and of how, what is to him straightforward material may involve the student in many hours of study. For this reason, the good lecturer may well back up his lecture with concise lecture notes which enable the student to increase his understanding, not only of the topic as a whole, but of the salient points made by the various authors. The less good lecturer will do the work for the student by being too helpful and so deny the student the opportunity to extend himself.

If there are visiting lecturers, especially when the topic to be addressed is one that his students are engaged in, the good lecturer may well encourage his students to attend the lecture. Although those lectures, which are for the benefit of staff, may be on a higher plane, the good lecturer may consider it good for the students to hear how philosophers discuss specific points. In such situations students can hear how Philosophy is done, and develop an appreciation of how questions are phrased and how diverse are the ways in which arguments are defended.

Since lecturing is an art, and it is said that no artist is ever entirely satisfied with his creation, it is highly unlikely that any lecturer will ever be completely satisfied with his work. None the less, there are some very good lecturers in the Philosophy Department of this and other universities, and while few of them are likely to have all the attributes which I have highlighted, very many will have a sufficiently large number to allow them to be called good Philosophy lecturers.
How I would like to learn about psychology at university.

Christine Hanson
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Psychology Subject Centre

It doesn’t matter how good the university is. It doesn’t matter how good the course is. The best subjects can become more boring than watching last week’s cheese slowly moulding if they aren’t taught with enthusiasm and vigour. Psychologists are lucky we are told. It’s a dynamic, multidisciplinary subject, drawing information from across realms to yield an all-encompassing picture of the human mind and behaviour. And, with these promises firmly rooted in the minds of fresh undergraduates, grows an expectation that these qualities will become apparent in the ways they are taught and learn.

The most effective methods of learning do not necessarily have to be new and fresh: rather, interesting but accessible, useful but fun. However this does not mean to say that the older traditional methods wouldn’t benefit from an overhaul. Lectures are an integral part of the university experience, along with the dwindling student loan and acquiring traffic cones, but they are perhaps most at risk for being just plain dull. The lectures that provide the best learning experience are those that are clear and comprehensive, explained first in laymen’s terms and becoming gradually more complicated and specialised throughout. When bombarded with too much information at once there is a danger of students becoming swamped in detail and disappearing in a quagmire of bewilderment and confusion. Clearly organised handouts with discrete sections are invaluable for revision later, and those with short focused revision questions at the end allow the braver students to test their understanding.

Although university requires self-motivation and commitment to work, learning can be greatly enhanced by peers not just within a year, but between years as well. It is perhaps regrettable that when entering many psychology departments some form of network isn’t systematically laid down connecting the previous years with the new. Such a scheme would strengthen bonds between the years and those seeking support with revision topics, exam techniques and general queries would have an additional source of information who can fully sympathise with their plight. Within years, the potential to learn through teamwork and discussion is huge. Failing that, the sense of solidarity felt when everyone is lost at sea over the same topic reassures us that we are at least all in the same boat. Perhaps the most fantastic medium for this yet is the online forum hosted by the departmental website. With assessment deadlines looming, the number of people leaving desperate pleas for help starts rising, but most wonderfully, so do the replies. The fear of asking a silly question is removed, and all users benefit.

A stark contrast to this however, is the regular tutor group meeting. An open question fielded to a group of about twelve students, but no takers. Everyone sits there, staring at the floor, ‘please don’t ask me’ radiating from their demeanour. But why? Not inconceivably, large tutorial groups make it easy to hide, or a particularly articulate student may unintentionally dominate the discussion. For a good tutor this might not be a problem, but there are other things that can also drastically improve the tutorial experience. Smaller group sizes encourage everyone to participate, and the chance to contribute without intimidation. This has been demonstrated when splitting larger tutorial groups up for the purpose of presentations for example, yielding a more balanced input from everyone. Equally, tutorial groups don’t benefit from being too small, as then this removes the element of lively discussion and debate. Back in the tiny sixth form I left behind the average class size was six, allowing for considerable individual contribution, group work, organised debates, and informative question and answer sessions. Although harder to apply in a university setting, there is the added bonus that classes can be shuffled round regularly, adding communication skills, adaptability, and flexibleness to the list of plus points.
Many courses include compulsory research hours, participating in current research being conducted within the department. Interestingly, some prospectuses fail to mention this and it is hardly surprising to find that students fall into two distinct camps regarding research participation. There are those that see it as an advantage, a useful insight and a valid experience of research from the guinea pigs point of view. And then there are those that reluctantly give their consent and sit there begrudgingly, mumbling about the validity of using psychology students in research. The role of research participation is far too intrinsic to be completely ignored, but perhaps it could be optional, with other alternatives also offered; an extended essay on research methods, additional research tutorials, or seminars? It is important to remember that not all psychology students go on to work in scientific research and the experience is more useful for some than others.

Ultimately left to last: statistics. Seemingly not enjoyed by anyone, bar those people who enjoying knowing the probability that your computer and not theirs will crash in the next exam. The interaction of the poor stigma attached to stats and the dry nature usually adopted to teach it makes it dull and difficult. This needs to be overcome, perhaps with active participation in collecting data, clear succinct summaries, flow charts and diagrams. Something that’s easy to dip back into is imperative, as students will be returning to their stats notes throughout the duration of their degree.

In conclusion, the best learning experience for psychology at university is dependent upon the combination of innovative ideas and traditionally proven methods, contributing to an appealing, supportive environment that encourages students to learn. It should start plainly, becoming incrementally complex, with structured accompanying notes, but always allowing students the freedom of discussion, review and interpretation. Work as an individual, but also as part of a group should be emphasised, and support drawn from a variety of sources, including online assistance. Learning doesn’t have to be monotonous. It can be as rich and diverse as psychology itself, and only when the students say its good is it truly so.
“What makes the best learning experience for social work students?”

Yvonne Tyree  
Anglia Polytechnic University  
Social Policy and Social Work:

I undertook my Diploma in social work training at APU in Cambridge. I am currently an undergraduate student studying for my social work degree.

During my Dips/w I was very fortunate to participate in an elective module entitled “working with service users using creative arts” This module was experiential throughout however the need to translate theory into practice was essential if we were to understand the benefits of employing such techniques with service users.

I participated in art therapy facilitated by an art therapist working in a hospital for terminally unwell service users, a day of movement facilitated away from the university, a drama session at a centre specialising in therapeutic sessions for service users, poetry writing, use of puppets, a music session facilitated by a music specialist, and sessions of self-awareness to enable each of us to understand the impact and power of using such techniques. As a group we had to learn to trust one another through some testing experiences.

Whilst studying creative arts we were expected to share some of our own personal journeys with one another, this proved quite difficult for some of the group. However it allowed us to develop some empathy and understanding of what it might be like for service users who are expected to share personal areas of their lives with social workers on a fairly regular basis.

In order to pass this module we were expected to choose an area of creativity that we felt would allow service users to express themselves. We then formed small working groups to plan and demonstrate our creative ideas to the rest of the group. Each group was videoed by the lecturer for validation purposes.

As part of the process it was necessary to give clear consideration to equal opportunities and inclusion as well as the theory relating to the chosen piece of creativity.

In my group we chose to use music and movement. The experiential sessions we had participated in had impacted upon our desire to demonstrate that this particular creative medium can be used with both able-bodied service users and those with a physical disability. It can also be used with children, adults and older service users.

Differing cultures can also use the methods to interpret the music and movements in line with their beliefs and culture.

Within my group we read the theories relating to the use of movement and together we wrote a script to be narrated by one member. We then planned and practiced a warm up routine that could be used by various service users. We also demonstrated a routine of movement to music using scarves both for texture (particularly useful for children, sensory impaired service users or older service users) and to establish a sense of inclusion by the joining of these at the end of the choreographed piece.

Experiential learning also occurred on some of the main lectures such as Social work theories, methods and models. As part of this module we formed small groups to discuss the methods and how these work in practice, as part of this process we encountered the stages associated with Tuckman’s group work theory. We were then tasked with demonstrating a chosen method to the large group through role-play (this was videoed).
We chose to use a scenario involving a parenting group and staff members. As part of our role-play we used life size puppets as the children. We addressed anti-discriminatory practice issues and stereotyping of parents through the ethnic origins of the puppets and the roles we played. As a consequence of being part of this process I believe I am more able to consider the models and theories I apply to my every day work than if I had sat in a classroom to study.

Experiential learning was a learning style favoured by many of the lectures on my Dip s/w. As a student I believe I learnt and remembered more from these lectures than from traditional teaching. The impact and power of learning from experience enabled me to develop some understanding of the service user perspective and to develop my own self-awareness.

As a social worker I have carried this learning forward into my practice. For example I worked with the Travelling community and part of my role included offering the children new experiences. Therefore I took a group of them to a local dance school for 3 sessions, where they were taught some simple dance routines as a group. The children loved the experience.

In my current role I work in a child protection team and as part of empowering the children to share their feelings I use creative arts, particularly drawing. Each of their pictures makes up part of my child protection reports for conference. One child recently produced a book with me to illustrating to his parents, his feelings of being despair at being caught in the middle of their arguments.

I firmly believe that experiential learning taught me a great deal and was the best way for me to learn.