

What makes a good psychology lecturer?

Seh Hyun Rho's winning piece in the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network's essay competition, plus a selection from the other entries

'Some people talk in their sleep. Lecturers talk while other people sleep.'

Albert Camus encapsulates the challenge for all lecturers: to capture and sustain a hungover and disgruntled student's attention at 9am; convey the intricate details of a study in a clear, concise and coherent manner as well as link it to broader debate; and whet the students' appetites and pique their curiosities for knowledge even further. The cardinal sin of any lecturer may be to simply read out from Powerpoint or handouts, but what qualities are needed for a good psychology lecturer?

Lecturers need to mentally bend down to meet the students' intellectual eye and convey vast amounts of complex information. How to explain the numerous gene-environmental interactions of schizophrenia, or the

inherently problematic nature of factor analysis? Although this can be achieved via excellent skills in pedagogy and organisation – structuring lectures, providing an overview and delivering the lecture in a coherent and comprehensive manner – psychology itself is open to a plurality of approaches to enable robust learning. William James describes the trade of a lecturer as: '...paid to talk, talk talk! It would be an awful universe if everything could be converted into words, words, words.'

Putting aside philosophical alarm, psychology lecturers are at an immense advantage in comparison to other disciplines. Psychology lends itself to approach from a variety of routes and through diverse entry points: diagrams, logic, auditory stimuli, video presentations, everyday examples, case studies and even humour. What better way to learn than to see the Necker cube illusion first-hand to

suggest perception is constructive; the McGurk effect to argue speech perception is multimodal; or a patient performing a line bisection task to observe the detrimental effects of blindsight? More students can be reached as some learn better through stories, equations or watching videos in addition to promoting robust understanding by not conceptualising a topic in a single way.

Especially crucial to psychology is the need to think systematically, critically and creatively: how to study the issue empirically; what control groups to marshal; how to analyse data; and how to revise the hypothesis in the face of challenging evidence or eliminate alternative explanations. Lecturers should perpetually nurture scientific thinking – not to confuse correlation with causation – as well as lateral thinking to devise new ways of thinking about a problem. Students with such capacities are essential for continued progress beyond university and this will benefit them in any areas they choose to pursue. Lecturers who expose students to different solutions, methods of arriving at solutions and criteria for evaluating solutions will achieve this. By presenting a lecture on the history of the dopamine hypothesis of schizophrenia, its modifications and competing theories, students will learn more than mere facts. For example, students will learn how different studies can narrow understanding of the role of

The 21st-century lecturer

The 21st-century lecturer has changed from their predecessors of the 19th or 20th century. No longer is it about the 50-minute monologue with the lecturer professing from the front lectern to a room full of (sometimes awake) students. Now the lecturer must engage, enthuse, motivate, facilitate and may use a range of new technologies – podcasts, virtual learning environments, avatars or electronic games and simulations, to name but a few. The lecturer has moved from the front of the student group to behind them – nudging, enthusing and promoting irrespective of the location (whether it be the lecture room, the computer suite, the lounge or study).

There are, of course, characteristics of a lecturer that students may consider ideal but that certain lecturers may shy away from. Some students want to have full handouts, with lecturers presenting all of the information in a clear and concise manner. Many lecturers would agree that information has to be presented clearly and engagingly, but lecturers may want to signpost, to promote and facilitate independent learning. The 'spoon feeding' of complete information is anathema to many. Lecturers should promote active learning rather than passive presentation of information, irrespective of how clearly and concisely this is organised.

Of course, a truly good lecturer can be identified by having a solid partnership between themselves and their student group. But what does this mean? It means having the enthusiasm, the passion to stimulate and encourage. It means having the students' interests at heart but not pandering to unrealistic or inappropriate expectations. It means being on top of the subject but being able to make material accessible, relevant and meaningful. It means being constructive, developmental but critical and analytical.

So what makes a good lecturer? To a large extent, it depends on who you ask and when you ask them! It also depends on your philosophy of pedagogy, your subject matter, your experiences and, of course, the student group. However, there are some key characteristics of a good lecturer that transcend these factors and that all seem to agree on. There are the technical skills of lecturing – organisation, presentation and clarity for example – but most importantly the passion, enthusiasm, and approachability of the individual.

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No longer leading from the front – but nudging, enthusing and promoting

transmitters, the interactions between genes and the environment, and the inadequacy of relying on one neurotransmitter to explain a heterogeneous disease, thus suggesting other ways to study the same topic.

Furthermore, excellent lecturers promote synthesis of knowledge. Psychology is a broad and multifaceted discipline combining neuroscience, genetics, computation, social sciences, statistics, and even philosophy. Although lecturers dissect the topics, the goal of education is to apply it in real life in a variety of contexts. This requires the power of synthesis, both inside and outside the domain of psychology.

A lecturer who presents the limitations of dual task via an article announcing a new law prohibiting talking on mobile phones whilst driving illustrates the importance of the topic, its implications and future directions. Lecturers should foster outward thinking by forging links with other topics to promote concrete understanding that is robust. As Jean Piaget writes, 'the principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done – men who are creative, inventive and discoverers'. Simply to regurgitate the lecturer's notes is futile, but to entrench the new knowledge in a meaningful context will be eased by the lecturer's competence.

However, perhaps the most critical attribute of a successful lecturer is their genuine passion. Enthusiasm is contagious: opening a Pandora's Box of understanding and consequent pleasure, wonder and interest in the lecture hall breeds hunger for further knowledge elsewhere. Any lecturer's unbridled devotion imbues students to hunt down and read original papers from the early 20th century in the library; search the internet for the most recent developments on epigenetic research; and discuss controversial ethical issues during lunch breaks. A typical one-hour lecture is, at best, a narrow window into the vast realm of competing theories and empirical evidence accrued for decades or centuries that some have dedicated their whole lives to study. Students must feel motivated to dig deeper on their own.

Overall, any lecture hall should be suffused with three magic ingredients: Intelligence, Interaction and Inspiration. All lecturers must be up to date with recent findings, technological advances and future directions. Lecturers who demand students interact with the material rather than being passive recipients – to experience, challenge

Other views

'When I look back on my four years of university education, the lecturers are one of the first memories that comes to mind. They are the most important element of university life.'

General attributes

'I have asked several people the question of this essay. Without so much as a glance at technical lecturing skills, the unfailing answer is in just one word – passion.'

'Outside the lecture theatre, the good psychology lecturers, in my view, are the approachable ones. There are plenty of pompous academics with time only for their research, but the ones that you feel you can stop on campus, or knock on their office door without trepidation are the ones I respect the most.'

'The biggest mistake that a lecturer can make is to show fear.'

'Talking to you for two hours and making you feel as though you have only been listening for half an hour.'

Lecturer/student interaction

'If you are new to lecturing, or you are nervous, it is never a good idea to show it. We don't know it, so don't make it obvious! If you take a class like you've done it a dozen times before, likely you can fool us – we're not that smart!'

'A good lecturer is one that is responsive to the audience, their cues, priorities and needs. In some settings this may be achieved by asking people what they want to get out of your lecture, and being responsive to this if you can.'

'A good lecturer is one who takes the time and effort to listen to students and to provide an interactive learning environment, in which questions and answers are exchanged.'

'It is communicating in a way that reminds students that whilst they are here to learn, they are also part of psychology's academic community that is ever evolving.'

Lecture structure

'Coming out from the lectern, adding to the slides and being organised will hold your students attention and keep them fully into the subject matter.'

'A good lecturer has an agenda and at the beginning of the session, will outline the direction of the lecture by providing students with the aims and objectives. This gives students an idea of the overall meaning to be gained from the lecture.'

Context and anecdotes

'Contextualising ideas is also excellent – many theories are difficult to understand and remember in abstractions. However, taking an idea into real-world and daily situations can make it both more memorable and penetrating. For instance, I never remember social exchange and equity theory without also remembering my lecturer's blood-donating anecdote. Having been in a serious accident in his twenties, he needed a large blood transfusion. Many years later, when he himself became a donor, he remarked that he realised he'd become less concerned about donating when he had equalled how much he had received.'

IT, videos and other materials

'The most surprising thing happened in a recent lecture: we watched a YouTube video! Students always love videos, and there is a particular abundance of them in psychology. The strategic use of technology and multimedia materials can enrich a lecture or tutorial, really bringing it alive for us all.'

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and understand its implications – are excellent. Lastly, the ability to inspire students to seek further understanding is perhaps the most essential yet the easiest to achieve, given the lecturer's own interest in psychology. If all psychology lecturers could achieve this, future generation of psychologists would be equipped to avoid ethical pitfalls, advance current technology and illuminate further

the complex underpinnings of our wonderful discipline.



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