
Eight Hot Tips for Lively Lectures

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Introduction

Over the years, scholars in the field of communication have studied the "communication style" of successful teachers. Studies have focused on college and high school faculty, and reveal that those rated highest by students for creating an effective learning environment are those who demonstrate dynamism in talking about lecture content. Consequently, effective teachers know their materials and display an eagerness to communicate those ideas. I hope my "eight hot tips" will help you consider your approach to the room full of 250 eager students. These ideas have helped me and many of my colleagues.

1. Position

Research suggests that you position yourself as close to the students as possible. Try moving out toward the students, walking closer to them, instead of standing behind the podium at all times. If you are using a microphone, obtain a cordless one which can be clipped to your lapel. Walk back and forth, showing students you are interested in communicating with them, and reducing the likelihood that they will talk to each other during your lecture.

2. Stories

Try to weave stories about the content of your materials into your lectures. Audiences remember stories easily, so if you can create stories to impart the meanings within your materials, it is likely that students will pay closer attention and remember the concepts. Research indicates that effective college instructors use about five stories per lecture, and that these stories or illustrations are directly tied to the lecture content. Some stories will work well, and others might not. Keep the effective ones and discard those that do not seem as useful.

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3. Friendly Style

A friendly and relaxed style is most effective. However, an instructor must maintain control at the same time. If you are close in age to your students, you may consider this a disadvantage, since credibility is often linked to age. But if you know your subject matter well, then your age may give you an even greater advantage, because you are likely to understand your students better than someone twenty years your senior.

4. Reinforcement

When giving assignments or talking about why students are being assigned certain materials, always cite positive reinforcers -- e.g., "Mastering this theory will allow you to better understand why certain chemicals cause negative effects in human beings," "This reading should help you to see the importance of employee motivation," and "Studying this chapter will help you to detect fallacies in logic." Avoid negative reinforcement such as, "You must learn this to get a passing grade in my class." Positive reinforcement is a better way to motivate students to learn the material.

5. Dynamic Style

Competent instructors typically deliver their lectures enthusiastically. While two lecturers might know their subject equally well, the lecturer who delivers material with energy -- with a dynamic style -- will be perceived as more competent and interesting. Frame your lectures so that you discuss points or ideas that actually do excite you; change examples in a way that fascinates you. The more excited you are about content, the more students will also be excited and view you positively. Avoid "boring" content; you will be perceived as boring if you deliver boring content. Reframe your content to make it exciting, enhancing the likelihood you will deliver it dynamically.

6. Humor

Experts say that superb teachers use humor in conjunction with course content. Humor is important, because it

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can make dry content seem more interesting. It is also a good way to keep students awake in class, or to encourage participation. Humor may include situations which relate to the lecture content ideas, or funny comments which portray misunderstandings regarding a subject. Research indicates that "light tone" and humor are devices used quite often by the college teachers receiving the highest marks from students. In fact, many use up to seven instances of humor per lecture. These are not lengthy jokes, but light jabs or references that might create a giggle or laugh, such as when the instructor makes fun of himself or herself. For example, referring to a complex chart on the screen, he might make fun of his poor eyesight : "Oh oh, I hope I can read this."

7. Self-Disclosure

While experts do not suggest that we bore our students by telling our life story, they do say that intermingling self-disclosing stories or remarks throughout our lectures attracts students' attention. Giving your students glimpses of important events in your life helps them to relate to you and to your treatment of the subject matter. Studies indicate that effective instructors might make several such personal disclosures per lecture. Again, these need not be lengthy or complicated stories, but simply references to self: "I once talked to this author at a conference--we really got along well..."

8. Videotape Yourself

Watching yourself on videotape is a good way to be constructively self-critical; you should be the first one to decide which characteristics of your presentation style need help. If you can get a videotape of one of your lectures, analyze how you come across to your students. Your verbal and nonverbal channels of communication should not include the "powerless" forms of talk: "aah", "umm", "you know?" You may want to record which patterns distract from your effective delivery and try to eliminate them. Also take note of any body movements which might be viewed as distracting or unnerving to a student

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audience. Videotape offers you a very powerful tool in becoming a more effective presenter.

Faculty have chuckled, after hearing my "eight hot tips," that if they did what the research suggests (especially on #2, #6 and #7), they would have no time for any subject matter content. So, for those tips, each of us has to assess what feels compatible with our own lecture style, and then go ahead and experiment with the techniques. The idea behind these eight suggestions is to develop a dynamic interplay between lecture and content so that students enjoy attending your lectures and are eager to learn.

Notes: