

Motivating students and stimulating interest

A good teaching tip-sheet

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This tip-sheet provides ideas and opinions for motivating students and stimulating interest in a subject, as raised by RMIT lecturers who discussed their teaching experiences as part of the Course Experience Survey (CES) Analysis Project (<http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/CESanalysis>).

The CES explores students' perceptions of the motivational aspects of a course through two items:

- Item 9: *'The teaching staff in this course motivate me to do my best work'*
- Item 17: *'The teaching staff work hard to make this course interesting'*

In discussions of these items with RMIT staff, many lecturers noted that one of the ways in which they tried to motivate students was by **engaging** them – and then maintaining that engagement, by making the course **interesting**.

Most lecturers used a range of methods designed to make their courses more interesting for students and to motivate students. Some of these are summarised below.

What are lecturers doing to motivate their students and make their courses interesting?

Relevance, contextualisation and 'real world' application

"One of the ways we try to motivate our students is to demonstrate the relevance of what they are learning. The field in which these students will be working is vocational, and they need to know why it is so important that they properly understand how to do their job well. Real life examples of the experiences of real people are a good way to show them what happens – and how wonderful it is – when you get it right!"

- Demonstrate the **relevance** or **context** of topics, and develop ways of linking them to 'the real world'. In addition to motivating students within a course, this contextualisation can also help to provide a focus on career development.
- Provide variety and **demonstrate practical application** through the use of guest speakers, real life case studies, or even field trips. Interaction with industry professionals exposes students to current practice, and provides different perspectives to the lecturer's alone.
- Develop projects, assignments and assessment strategies that enable students to connect knowledge with **their own experiences**.
- Share anecdotes and stories from **your own industry experience** to help illustrate the application and relevance of theory.

Currency of information

“Students in our courses appreciate the fact that teaching staff are actively involved with policy making in the industry, and make a major contribution to materials and resources for professionals in the field. For students, there is an immediacy which comes from seeing the integration of research outcomes, largely informed by staff work, into the resources they study. This is enhanced by staff members with recent industry experience, who can share stories of their experiences in the field. It is quite motivating for students to know that the material they are learning was developed by members of staff in partnership with industry.”

- Ensure that **examples and case studies are up-to-date** and reflect current practices, standards and issues, so that students can better relate to and understand them and can develop a proper understanding of what will be required of them in their future employment.
- Maintain and demonstrate **connections between teaching staff and industry bodies**. Students have been seen to gain great confidence in their learning from the knowledge that those teaching and overseeing the course are closely involved with the development of standards and practice within the industry.

Variety of activities, materials and methods of presentation

“In order to break up the theory a bit in my classes, I occasionally have an ‘ad break’. I tell my students a story about something which is light and interesting, but still related to the topic we are studying. For example, I may tell them a brief story about a Nobel Prize winner in the field and how they achieved what they did, or what they have contributed to the domain. I have found that students then tend to relate to the theory more - and with more interest.”

- Select **different methods of presentation** as appropriate for different topics, eg: a PowerPoint slideshow for communication of a highly visual topic; a group discussion to provoke critical thinking or controversy; etc.
- **Introduce competitions** as a way to motivate effort and interest - eg: for small group work, research projects, etc.
- **Invite successful students** from previous years to talk to students about what to expect in the course.

Intuition and flexibility

“One of the first things I do with my students is to explore what it is that they wish to learn from the course; what they will need to achieve. Of course, I have a plan and learning objectives already set out, but these discussions both give ME a sense of what will interest my students, and give THEM a sense of ownership of the course.”

- Invest time in gauging the **different needs, objectives or learning styles** of your students, and develop strategies for meeting them.
- Begin the semester by **asking students what they expect or hope to learn**, and together set some goals for the course. In knowing what interests students, you can tailor parts of the course – including assessments – to help students fulfil their personal learning goals, as well as those of the course.
- Design your lectures and classes with **flexibility and room for improvisation**. Let students’ interests, needs and comments guide the path a class takes – as long as the desired objectives are achieved.

Good organisation and clear expectations

"I have developed my course to be super-organised, and I think that makes students comfortable and gives them confidence. They always know what they will be doing and what's required of them because they have a detailed planner which outlines weekly topics and assessments. Reminders are emailed to students as well as all information being available on Blackboard. Assessments are spread across the semester which provides a balanced workload, clarifies the link between the material and assessment, and motivates students to keep up with the work."

- At the beginning of a semester, **examine the entire layout of your course** in order to ensure topics are structured, expectations are clear, and material is well organised and easily accessible.
- Provide students with a **weekly planner**, including a description of well-linked topics and assessments, so students know exactly what they will be doing and when.
- Explain the **relevance of each topic to the course learning objectives**, to ensure lectures follow a logical sequence.
- Develop (and distribute) **clear criteria for assessments** which provide students with a detailed explanation of *what* must be done, *how* best to do it, and *why* it is important to do so.

The lecturer's disposition and student rapport

"I believe that sharing my own experiences with the students, and having some knowledge of their backgrounds and cultural sensitivities, helps in building a rapport with them. This is especially true with my many overseas students."

- Expressing your **enthusiasm, passion or enjoyment for your discipline** can have positive impact on students, and tends to become both reciprocal and self-perpetuating in a class.
- **Use humour to make courses more interesting** for students. While humour is not a replacement for good teaching (and should not overly detract from the subject matter itself) it can express your interest in a topic, and make classes more engaging.
- Make the effort to get to know your students, **develop a good teacher-student relationship** and build an atmosphere of trust in the class. Show an interest in your students' backgrounds – particularly those from overseas.
- When teaching in a large venue or theatre, **physically move among the students** during discussions or questions, to interact more closely and make the class feel more personal.

Interaction – with lecturers *and* fellow students

"One of the ways I engage my students' interest is through interaction. Small groups work together on problems or case studies and then report outcomes to the class; students present real life applications of theoretical principles studied in previous classes; or as a whole group we analyse research articles and discuss the theory behind them."

- Incorporate a degree of **conversation or 'active communication'** into your lectures, in order to involve students in the process. These interactions not only increase students' engagement and understanding of topics through discussion, but can also help you to ascertain levels of student knowledge and understanding.
- Use **small group work** in projects, presentations or assignments to encourage students to learn through working together. Group work can help students to develop the necessary skills to discuss, co-operate and problem solve, as well as increase their independence and responsibility in learning.

Being positive and encouraging towards students

"I think people can assume that students are empty vessels. I disagree. I get to know my students, and their backgrounds, and I am acutely aware of who they are. This enables me to demonstrate to them the depth of their prior knowledge, and I constantly remind them of this. I see my role as assisting them in closing the gap between their knowledge and experiences outside university, and the course material."

- Encourage your students **to participate in the course, and share their ideas**. Reinforce the notion that there is 'no right or wrong answer' when thinking and discussing critically; everyone has experiences to share and an opinion to offer.
- View your classes as a **collaborative learning community**, and impart this conceptualisation upon your students. Focus on what students are doing *well*, before addressing areas in need of improvement – both within class and in assessments.
- Encourage students by **affirming the knowledge/experiences that they bring with them** to their course, and endeavour to incorporate this into class work (eg: assignments designed to draw on personal experience or current workplace).

The 'Good teaching tip-sheets' provide a brief summary of findings from interviews conducted with RMIT lecturers from 44 courses who discussed their teaching experiences as part of the CES Analysis Project.

Participants were asked about changes they had made to their course, and their motivations for doing so, and also about the ways in which they addressed the Good Teaching Survey (GTS) items most highly correlated with good teaching.

For full reports, documentation and related services, visit the project website at <http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/CESanalysis>.