Laboratory demonstrators

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Lynn Reitman describes her role as a practical demonstrator in the Medical Sciences laboratory.

What role/s does a demonstrator play in a practical class?
The role of the demonstrator in a prac class is vital. The class has a demonstrator designated as ‘prac leader’, who conducts a pre-lab session (usually 10-15 minutes; but can be as long as 30 minutes depending on what is being discussed and how much explanation is required) to inform the class as to the outline and timing schedule for the prac and to give a brief introduction on the topic.

The demonstrator’s role is to:
• demonstrate the technique of the prac to small groups
• make students aware of OH&S issues
• observe the students doing the prac
• comment on students’ technique
• give feedback
• answer questions.

The prac leader keeps an eye on the time, and keeps the students moving so that time is not wasted. The demonstrators then ask the students to pack up at the designated time, and observe them as they follow correct procedure for clean up (correct disposal of hazardous waste, cleaning of equipment and benches etc.)

The prac leader then gives a post lab discussion, tying together the results of the prac, discussing the student’s results with the case study provided and answering questions.

How do you plan and prepare for a class?
Demonstrators and students receive a program of prac classes at the start of the semester. As a demonstrator, I receive the prac outline and demonstrator notes with expected results a few days before the class. As a prac leader, I spend quite a lot of time preparing for the pre and post lab sessions at home in my own time.

Demonstrators are usually casual employees of RMIT and also work outside RMIT in the industry of which they are demonstrating. So although I feel competent in the techniques I am demonstrating, I like to be well prepared for the particular class and will spend substantial time reading, researching and going through student lecture notes, so that I know the level expected of the students.

Do you have any strategies for encouraging student participation or contribution?
I like to gather the students to the front of the lab/classroom (can be up to 40 students) to give a more informal feel to the post lab discussion. This encourages interaction with the students. I also ask the students to call out their results as I write the up on the whiteboard.
Since the demonstrators are working lab scientists, the students are interested because we can give practical lessons which happen in the lab everyday. I notice that if I begin a sentence with, for example, “Last Friday night when I was working the late shift, I had a patient present with …”, I have instantly got everyone’s attention, because it is real.

I think that the demonstrator’s link with industry is vital in making the course so practically oriented, and that is a huge benefit to the students.

What resources are available to assist you in your role?
Resources available are:
• the students lecture notes
• my own textbooks
• the library
• the lecturer, who is available for questions or discussion.

What support is provided for staff development and training?
I did an “Introduction to Blackboard” half-day workshop run through the RMIT ITS Training department.

How do you evaluate and reflect on your activities?
We have a short, informal debrief amongst the demonstrators after the class to discuss how the prac went, what could have been done better etc, and pass this on to the next prac class.