Teaching Strategies

Introduction
This document outlines some practical and constructive tips for teaching large groups of students. They are based on points noted when observing individual lecturers in the Faculty teaching undergraduate and postgraduate classes. This list of suggestions might seem longer than it should be, but they are not so much negatives, as things that might be improved upon. Readers should take them as constructive suggestions. We start with the things that might make an immediate impact on Subject Experience Survey (SES) scores and move to the less significant points.

Pitching your Lectures
In general don’t pitch lectures too high, either in terms of language used and content. What might be appropriate at a seminar for staff, or for doctoral students, is not appropriate for the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate students, which now consist of around 60 percent international students (for whom English is a second, third or fourth language). Lecturers need to be sensitive to the listener: it is hard to follow an hour lecture full of language like the actual examples below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual examples</th>
<th>Suggested alternatives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Simplistic orientation...”</td>
<td>a simple way to think of this</td>
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<tr>
<td>“metritocratic view ...”</td>
<td>“the idea that X is based on competence/merit</td>
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<tr>
<td>“geocentric mindset ...”</td>
<td>“from the X point of view (?)”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“harnessing of the X ...”</td>
<td>“putting to good use X”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Cultural change agent” ...</td>
<td>“A person responsible for doing anything to better the organisation”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Culturally contingent” ...</td>
<td>“based upon the impact of culture”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Distil appropriate behaviour” ...</td>
<td>“lead to an appropriate behaviour”</td>
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</table>

It is always harder to follow orally presented information—even for native English speakers. For other audiences, speakers need more cues/examples/stories so their audience can follow what they are saying. Sounding like a verbal version of a textbook is a real turn off.
and is sure to negatively affect SES scores.

This does not mean “dumb down the content”. It means “make the complex content simple enough so anyone in the room can follow it”. This is always harder than you think. The balance between getting it simple without compromising complex academic issues/content is astonishingly hard. A comment by one of the Faculty professors about one of the recent public presentations by one of the Nobel Laureates (Economics) was: “Wasn’t it amazing how he made such a difficult issue so easy to follow?”. A lecturer who can make complex ideas simple to follow is a good lecturer.

### Speaking Style

A good strategy is to adopt a **heightened conversational style**. This is what the experts on public speaking call the style needed to be a good speaker (Field, 1985). It is almost like you are talking to good friends. Not as informal as a discussion over coffee, and not as formal as a verbal version of a textbook:

“What are the major points that arise from the case? One of them is X. What else was important for the company? Can anyone tell me why so-and-so was a bad manager? Etc.

There is no jargon here and no unnecessarily complex language. It is not too informal either. Always the focus should be on communicating and getting the interest of the audience. The rest (further technical details) can come out in response to questions as issues are probed further. If you must introduce technical language, do it only after you have explained the point in simple language.

The Russian psychologist Vygotsky’s idea was “the zone of proximal development”: pitch the material at an appropriate level for the listener (who usually know little or nothing about the material) or ideally just above their current level of development (i.e., their “zone”). When they ask a question, demonstrate understanding, introduce the technical issues/terms, etc., and drive the point deeper. When they respond appropriately, drive it deeper again, and so on.

Always engage your audience in the process. It is a lecture not a book. An audience always require the courtesy of a simple example. Even better: elicit an example or two from the audience, and only then move to the jargon:

*X’s example is an expatriate who does things like this... Firstly, he blah blah ... (pause). Secondly, he also blah blah... (pause). Thirdly etc... Who can suggest a similar
situation from the text or your own experience? (pause)…
What does this suggest to you? How would you describe this kind of behaviour? (pause)… X’s term for it is “ethnocentric”. (pause) This simply means someone who ...

<table>
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<th><strong>Structure</strong></th>
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<td>It is trite but it is true. All good talks have a beginning, middle and end (10:80:10 ratio). Get things started by recalling what you did last lecture. Start with a clear summary of what happened last time and what you are going to do this time. Start the new lecture with an appetiser (something to get their interest like a surprising statistic or fact or a segment of video). Follow it with a clear outline of what you are going to do. Flag the outline with a slide and make it stand out verbally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Last time we met, we looked at X. (pause). We covered A, B and C and I told you that VVVV. Today’s lecture will be about Y. You may not know that 98 percent of blah blah (appetizer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I want to outline three main things today. (pause) The first is …. (pause) Now let’s move on to the first point, etc.</td>
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This kind of language helps everyone in the audience understand you. It is particularly helpful for international students who often have to translate between languages, at least when they first arrive. **Keep your sentences short and clear, pause a lot, and use deliberate transition signals.**

“That’s point number 2. (pause) Now let’s move on to the next point, number 3”.

In general more structure is needed for the body of the talk. How many parts will there be? Make this clear:

“I will first remind you of the ABC case. (pause) Second, we will have a look at the X. (pause) Third, we will analyse the concept of “XXXX” in relation to the typology, then ....

Make sure you have a clear conclusion. Don’t cut it abruptly short in the middle of a point or say you are going to continue this point next week. This is inconsiderate. In general, a lecture that covers fewer things in detail (leaving time to conclude properly) is better than a lecture crammed with stuff which is rushed at the end. End with finality flagging it for clarity:

“Now let’s conclude. (pause) I have made three main points...
This seems obvious, it is often neglected, and yet it always works well.

**Preparation**

Of course, it is important to be professional and well-prepared. Fiddling around with a video finding the right bit should be done before the class. Start by coming with everything ready to go. Make sure all the equipment works and you can seamlessly transfer from PowerPoint slides, to visualiser, to OHP, etc.

As students are arriving, spend time looking at the audience, smile, and walk around chatting to people about various things, demonstrating interest in them. This helps you too. Professional speakers recommend this to help get the conversational level right. If you start a class by rummaging through notes or slides or video, or you rush into the theatre at the last minute, you are more likely to start off at the wrong level (pitching it too high).

Arrive early with everything prepared. Look relaxed and in control. Chat to your students almost as friends. Some wrongly think this compromises the lecturer-student relationship, but it actually increases their respect for you.

**Questions to and from the audience**

Give plenty of opportunity for discussion. Always ask questions to check the understanding of your students. A lecturer who engages with the audience will always get better SES scores than someone who delivers their lecture without engagement from the audience.

Let clear questions emerge from your presentation like the made-up example above. You should routinely check their understanding after an especially complex point or example.

(Just ask: “Clear?” or “Are you with me?” and get nods of heads or a question asking for clarification.)

There is no point droning on unless they are with you and understand what you are saying.

Rhetorical questions are good in a talk but must be immediately followed with an answer from you. “So what does all this mean? ... Well, it is clear that X ...”

Always elicit salient points:
“We just saw John, a manager of a large multinational firm on the video... So what comments can you make about his situation? What were his concerns? ... Can anyone tell me? ... [short discussion maybe relating to students’ own experience] ... Now let’s see another expatriate, Harry ... (etc).

So a suggested structure might be:

- Get their interest first by using an example or two on a video (or some other medium, e.g., a short case study)
- Elicit the main points and expand
- Move to the general theory etc. (explain the terms here).
- Move to a way of understanding the differences (e.g., a conceptual typology or schema) asking questions and clarifying understanding as you go—refer this back to the examples in the video/case.
- Introduce more detailed points and relate it back to examples.

In general move from general points to specific detailed points and not the other way around.

**PowerPoint**

PowerPoint is like a knife: a wonderful tool if used correctly and a terrible one if used badly.

Lots of large, dense slabs of text never work well on PowerPoint. When this happens audiences automatically start reading and lose interest in you. The presentation dies. Putting slabs of text on PowerPoint is a recipe for the audience reading and losing interest in the presentation (which, after all, is the main game).

Break content into bullet points that can be read quickly and digested while they listen to you. Resist the temptation to have all your information on slides. The goal is always communication. What you say should be 60-80 percent more than what is written (as a general rule).

PowerPoint offers a lot of features to animate your content. Choose features wisely. Too many images and animation not only can consume a lot of time in both preparation and presentation, they provide less add-on value. Resist the temptation of using sound effects and multiple animation effects. A powerful presentation is sometimes one that is simple.

Choose your colours wisely. You would not want a lime green text on a pink background. Do not get too fancy with fonts either. Keep them simple and consistent across all slides as possible. Although PowerPoint has a lot of clip-art and images, explore other images.
which you might use. Instead of those boring black clip-art images, why not search the internet for free-to-use good quality stock photos?

**Balance between preparation and engagement**

We are convinced that there is an inverse square rule to good teaching: having too much information prepared on slides or notes means that lecturers are tempted to cover the content. This can mean that lecturers do not respond to the audience needs. No engagement = bad teaching. Having less information allows for more student engagement and lecturer-student exchange. But how do you achieve this?

As a lecturer you are performing much as a musician or an actor does, always balancing on the precipice of things potentially going awry (though, of course, holding things together). You are a tightrope walker.

An audience responds well to this creative tension. A lecture that is too “slick” or professional is never as interesting or engaging as one that is “natural”. Similarly, a lecture that is obviously unprepared is never as good as one that is prepared. The trick is to be well enough prepared so that a professional performance is given; but not hyper-prepared to allow enough scope for creative engagement. Some lecturers do this by providing minimal information slides with “stage directions” for question asking, commenting and engaging with the audience. Others do this by responding to the mood of the class on an as-needed basis.

In practise, the balance between preparation and engagement means not necessarily catering for all and every contingency. You do not have to provide everything necessary for students. Paradoxically, doing this can mean disastrous classes. Students can, for example, have detailed material on handouts which they can pick up later after the lecture. You DO have to create a climate of interest and engagement. The focus should be on this, not excessive preparation (though this is, of course, not an argument for complete lack of preparation and ad-libbing).
Handouts and slides

When students read lecture slides they are, by definition, not focussing on you. This could be probably because: a) overheads are too hard to read if they are too dense; b) worse still, they have lost interest in the presentation as a performance, and have decided to obtain stimulation from handouts instead.

It is a good idea not to hand out lecture slides before a lecture for this reason, though this is not the standard practice and students often demand handouts. However, if the lecture is well-delivered, we find that students will be less likely to complain about “no upfront handouts”.

When you must show a lot of text (e.g. a case description) read it all out for them. This keeps the control of the presentation on you, and avoids a room full of people all reading at different speeds. You can also emphasise important points this way.

Standing and walking

Despite it being a pillar of comfort for nervous lecturers, don’t stand behind the lectern all the time. You should move in front of the lectern, over to the far side, etc. Use the whole space available. This is an actor’s trick to show enormous confidence and to get their attention. Even a two-month old baby knows that a moving object is more interesting than a stationary one.

Try walking a few steps up the side of the theatre, even to the end, and, in a friendly way, mingling a little with students as they think and discuss the content. Give them a task to do e.g., writing a list of examples (kneel beside or sit with them to help; this is interpreted as friendly and is disarming). We have done this recently and found that it created a lot of attention and focus in the audience. No-one can hide at the back, everyone has to concentrate. This promotes learning and enjoyment too.

You can still operate PowerPoint from the front of the lectern, you just need to feed the mouse through the desk to the front (or you can use a portable “clicker”).

There is no good reason to stay in the one place during a lecture. It is boring, and you should be trying to engender a dynamic and interesting class interaction.
| Enthusiasm | Interacting with the audience by smiling and exchanging views with them is the way to overcome perceptions of aloofness. Humans find smiles disarming for evolutionary reasons. You don’t have to grin like a Cheshire cat.  

If you look like you enjoy teaching—and like being with the students (i.e., you find their comments helpful)—it makes a huge difference. We think this is 95 percent of the trick of good teaching. If they sense you would rather been doing research they start to shuffle, look bored, text using their phone or don’t turn up at all. Show enthusiasm and the SES improve dramatically (there are empirical studies showing this, see point 11 below).  

If you are eager about what you say, chances are your students will too. Showing enthusiasm can lead to heightened interest. Show excitement for your subject. Even when students generally find your subject less interesting, enthusiasm makes a big difference. Enthusiastic lecturers can often deliver what might otherwise be a boring topic very interesting and students will not notice that time has passed by so quickly. So you have just saved yourself the unpleasant thought of seeing them texting, or coming out of the class.  

Speak with real feelings. If you had to tell a story of your recent trip, how would you share it? Tell a story that would let them feel as if they were with you on the trip. That is enthusiasm in action. The same is true in a lecture. It is not the details of the lecture (content) that will move your students but the excitement of that remarkable journey. |
|---|---|
| Gesture | Everyone knows that gesturing is important for a lecturer. This is clear by comparing a lecturer who does not gesture and one that does. The difference is stark.  

Sometimes even shy lecturers can learn to adopt a totally different persona when they teach. They become much more animated; flapping their arms around, walking about, raising and lowering the pitch. We think this level of enthusiasm makes a big difference (One of the studies in this area raised the SES by one SD just by employing these strategies, everything else was the same). (Williams & Ceci, 1997)  

The experts in public speaking recommend gesturing twice in every sentence when you practise so that it becomes automatic in the real presentation (Field, 1985). Gesture makes no difference to the content of a lecture of course—bad content can be delivered well (see the literature of the “Dr Fox” experiment, where an actor delivered a lecture of nonsense about “mathematics and behaviour” |
to rousing acclaim from education professionals) (Naftulin, Ware, & Donnelly, 1973). However, since we are making recommendations for teaching strategies, this is one thing we’d suggest. Students *should* be able to distinguish content from performance, but they often can’t. A good teacher makes learning “fun” or at least engaging for them. If they are engaged they learn better and enjoy classes more.

**Body language**

Lecturers often do not pay particular attention to their body language. Body language does not naturally come to mind as something that will influence student learning; however, it is important to be aware of your own body language and what messages it might potentially convey. It plays a key role in communication and increasing your awareness can help you develop a better understanding of yourself and others.

Body language varies between cultures. The particular culture you belong to may also explain the body language you use or are used to. We’ve probably heard of stories of how handshakes, bowing, or smiling are perceived differently in other cultures. For example, Varner and Beamer (2004, cited in Wang, 2010) finds that people in western cultures make intermittent eye contact to show interest and trustworthiness while in Japan direct eye contact can be interpreted as an invasion to one’s privacy. North Americans are said to require an arm’s length personal space while the French, Latin Americans, and Arabs need less personal space, and Germans and Japanese need more.

As lecturers, pay attention to eye contact, facial expression, posture, and proximity (Peachy, 2005).

**Eye contact**

Eye contact is critical. Always keep an eye contact with your students. Do not ‘talk to the board’ when lecturing, look up or down, or look to the entrance and exit doors. When keeping eye contact, make sure to do this across the room or in the case of a large theatre, at several audience groups or points. Again, experts in public speaking recommend that, when practising, range the eyes regularly in three main areas of the room (left side, middle and right side). This makes everyone in the audience feel you are looking at them.

**Facial expression**

There’s nothing more boring than having to see a lecturer with a poker face. Smile often when talking. Facial expressions can convey mood and sometimes confusion.
Posture
Your posture can convey how you are making a point. If you had to sit, leaning towards or backwards from your seat can also send various messages. Maintaining a good posture is as important as making a point itself. Sitting in slouchy way (your chair is not your home sofa) or standing at a single position throughout the lecture does not convey interest and enthusiasm.

Proximity
Westerners tend to require some distance when talking to other people while Asians keep less space and sometimes touch when talking. When teaching in the Faculty, it is better to maintain a reasonable amount of personal space between you and your students. Too near, you might be overly casual. Too distant, you might be perceived as unapproachable or less friendly.

Dealing with nervousness
The first thing to be said about nervousness is that it is entirely natural. It would be unnatural not to experience some degree of nervousness before a major presentation. Some may call it “excitement” and some may call it “nervousness” but the symptoms are the same (Field, 1985).

Evolution does not prime people to be “good” at standing up in front of others. The rush of adrenaline we experience is to be welcomed not avoided. A degree of nervousness is necessary for a good performance. The trick is to deal with the signs of nervousness—shaking hands, etc—and not to let it interfere with your lecture.

Often nervousness is not even noticed by students. This happens when we project an “air” of confidence by means of walking around the theatre, gesturing, modulating our voice, and so on. Confidence in this comes with preparation and practice.

Lecturers can deal with signs of nervousness by using “open-handed” gestures regularly. Don’t hide your hands behind your back or put them in your pockets. Nervous people often take shallow breaths, as if gasping. Learn to relax by taking deep, slow breaths. Finally, put yourself and everything else into perspective. What is it to be nervous anyway? The world does not end with just one lecture presentation. So relax.
Voice modulation

When discussing complex academic content, lecturers can sound a bit “flat”. This equals “dull” for many students. Modulating your voice will help. Practise raising and lowering the pitch, and pausing in between points. Adolf Hitler had this technique down pat (whatever his other dubious traits, it is acknowledged without dispute his skill as an orator).

Raise the intonation at the end of questions: “So what’s the main problem with this way of X?” “Why is this distinction important?” (get louder, look animated and raise the end of the sentence).

Student engagement depends largely on your speaking style. The style in which you communicate has a lot to do with your voice – its tone and modulation. After all, it is your voice that is your primary tool for instruction. Being increasingly aware of your voice lets you develop a good communication style.

Covering the content

If students want lots of content they can read a book. They want to be inspired to do the reading, and inspired to find the subject interesting. **It is the job of the lecturer to inspire them to learn.** Otherwise, learning might as well be done online and we can all go home.

A lecture that misses out on a lot of the content but still inspires is better than a boring lecture full of content. Don’t be rushed.

Lecturers can make the content a lot more interesting and engaging by dwelling on the examples more, expanding on them, or to use students to develop more examples. Running a 5 minute exercise to break the focus on content is good, e.g., mapping descriptions of expatriate types with the formal names for each (in groups of two or three). This will induce more student interest and engagement than 10 dry academic lectures.

Telling stories

Everybody loves a good story. You have the ability to hold students’ attention through effective storytelling. It can work to your advantage by engaging students to listen and learn. The key is to develop a story on key themes in your lecture. You do not want to tell a single story on all your topics or tell completely irrelevant stories. With good stories to listen to, students can place themselves in your story, leading to interest and engagement.

Students are always more interested when lecturers mention personal experiences. As soon as a lecturer says, “in my experience ...” or “I think that...” or “When I worked at Microsoft, I...” they pay more attention.
One of the VC Colloquium presentations in 2004 was excellent. The lecturer just stood out the front, showed us a picture of a musical instrument (the only slide used) and, for half an hour, weaved a compelling story about the circumstances he found himself in when allowed to see the instrument in the Museum of Baghdad. The war broke out, the museum basement was flooded, etc. The speaker got to the main “content” at the end. You could have heard a pin drop in a room with 600 people (completely transfixed). Stories always work with an audience.

Singling out audience members

This is not a good idea. They may not have prepared, may not have understood the material, may be shy, etc. We find that if the content is being delivered well (engagingly), and a legitimate question emerges, then they will fall over themselves trying to answer it. Singling out people just annoys students. (Imagine yourself in the same situation: We think that we all like the opportunity to engage if we feel like it, but not be “put on the spot”.)

Visualiser and OHP

These tools are useful when you wish to write ideas down or to develop answers in calculations. Using them avoids having your back to the audience using the whiteboard and allow you to model how to do an answer. Laudable aims. However, using the visualiser to write things only works if your writing is large and easy to read. Writing in BLOCK LETTERS helps. Visualiser slides also tend to shake.

Otherwise, try using the whiteboard but turning your back to the audience regularly to make a point and get their attention. Alternatively, you can make the different parts of the diagram emerge slowly on PowerPoint after asking for their input.

“What is the next branch needed in the diagram? Can anyone tell me? .... Let’s have a look (click)... As you can see ...”

(Harder preparation for you, but much more effective for the audience, and gives the sense that you are building their knowledge incrementally. There is the added advantage of something tangible to look at for revision).
Mannerisms

Pulling up your glasses? Touching your chin? Picking your nose? Scratching your ears? Saying ‘okay’ or ‘right’ every end of a sentence? These peculiar little things can tell you more than who you really are.

Lecturers are often not aware that they have developed some habitual gestures during lecturing that can be quite annoying or can send unwanted messages. We’ve observed in lectures that a lecturer was constantly taking off and putting back the cap of a whiteboard marker, thereby making an annoyingly incessant noise. Lecturers also say long ‘ummmm..’ or ‘ahhhh...’ which make them sound unsure of what they say. It is important to ‘listen’ to yourself at times and be aware of mannerisms that you do subconsciously.

Some students tend to remember these mannerisms, and unfortunately often in extreme vividness. There’s a student who actually made fun of these and counted the number of ‘OKs’ followed by a sentence in the whole lecture – and got hundreds! Thus, make yourself aware of unnecessary mannerisms and try to correct them.

Conclusion

Teaching is an imprecise business. The finer details are limitless in number. However, we believe that everyone can teach well with practise and experience.
References and Resources


