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Lectures and tutorials: Lessons for engaging enabling students and the potential benefits.

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In the changing world of higher education, there is increasing pressure to modernise teaching approaches, often through the use of technology. However, much of the focus and research relates to undergraduate students and tends to ignore aspects of 'traditional' teaching that may be critical in an enabling setting. A short survey of a broad range of enabling students at the University of Newcastle revealed the key elements of lectures and tutorials that engaged or disengaged students from their perspective. Relatively simple changes in teaching approach, such as appropriate pacing; organisation and content; interactivity; enthusiasm; and relevance have a considerable impact on whether students remain interested and involved with their course material or not. A set of recommended practices, and those to avoid, are presented in this paper along with a discussion of the wider benefits they may present for enabling students.

The tertiary education sector is in the midst of a period of significant change (Kukulska-Hume, 2012). Although this is occurring on a number of fronts, concerns about the pedagogical value of lectures, issues of non-attendance and the emergence of a raft of new technologies, including social media, are of particular interest.

Having a very long history, lectures remain one of the dominant modes of teaching in higher education (Gibbs, 1981; Phillips, 2005; Murphy & Sharma, 2010). Although viewed by some as the essence of university education, there is a growing view that they are an out-dated teaching method (Gibbs, 1981; Murphy & Sharma, 2010; Blagg, 2012). Traditional, didactic lectures are said to promote shallow learning (Phillips, 2005) and be ineffective in terms of student satisfaction, knowledge retention and achieving learning outcomes (Sandhu, Afifi, & Amara, 2012).

Related to this are concerns about student non-attendance that transcend disciplines, institutions and countries (Cleary-Holdforth, 2007; Sawon, Pembroke & Wille, 2012). Today's students lead complex lives with many competing demands and this means they set priorities, including class attendance (Cameron, 2011). For example, 73.7% of students had paid employment, 68.1% had other commitments and 47.3% had both, averaging 21 hours per week, whilst undertaking the UoN's Newstep full-time enabling program (Powter, 2011). Although the relationship between attendance and academic performance is not clear (Cleary-Holdforth, 2007), the issue cannot be ignored.

Due, at least in part, to concerns over the value of lectures and issues of non-attendance, there is a growing call to provide more online content or technology solutions (Fearon, Starr & McLaughlin, 2012; Kukulska-Hume, 2012; Sternberger, 2012). There is also

significant pressure to develop new and innovative educational approaches. This includes inverted or flipped classrooms, in which the lecturer is a 'guide on the side' rather than a 'sage on the stage' (Talbot, 2012) and blended learning, which mixes online learning with more traditional methods (Thorne, 2003). Online delivery is set to be a major element in higher education in the future, with blended learning touted to become the dominant form of delivery (Ross and Gage, 2006; Norberg, Dziuban and Moskal, 2011).

However, the inexorable movement towards the use of technology and its multitude of forms seems to imply that traditional teaching approaches have deficits for which there are technological solutions. This is important in the broader context, but is particularly important in enabling education. Enabling students have diverse personal, academic, financial and emotional backgrounds that have acted as barriers and often still represent significant hurdles to their participation in higher education (Bowl, 2001; Gale & Tranter, 2011). As such, the institutional interaction with these students must occur in a way that welcomes, motivates, stimulates and validates them as 'worthy' participants. As such, pedagogical considerations are certainly important, but not the only consideration for enabling students.

This paper aims to use student views to identify practical ways to better engage students and to explore the possible implications of this for enabling students.

Student survey and themes identified

Survey

Students surveyed were enrolled in one of three UoN open-entry enabling programs, Newstep (full-time over two semesters, 17-20 year old); and Open Foundation (≥ 20 years), in both Part-time (two semesters) and Intensive (full-time, one semester) modes, at two campuses. The anonymous survey, conducted in Semester 2 2012, invited students to provide free-text responses to four questions. Two questions related to lectures (below), which were repeated, but reworded, to focus on tutorials:

> Think about the lectures you have attended and, in particular the ones that kept you interested and involved with the topic. What were the things about those lectures that kept you interested and involved?

> For the lectures that didn't keep you interested and involved, what was it about them that made you feel that way?

Responses were collated and assigned to six lecture or four tutorial categories on the basis of their major theme. A total of 282 free-text responses were received, with 139 relating to lectures and 143 to tutorials.

Themes identified

Lectures

In lectures, the majority of respondents considered aspects of the lecturer to be the single most important factor influencing whether they remained interested and involved (Figure 1a). Although the way lectures were delivered and the lecturer's level of

organisation had an impact, enthusiasm was the factor rated by the majority of respondents as the most important in keeping them engaged (Figure 1b).
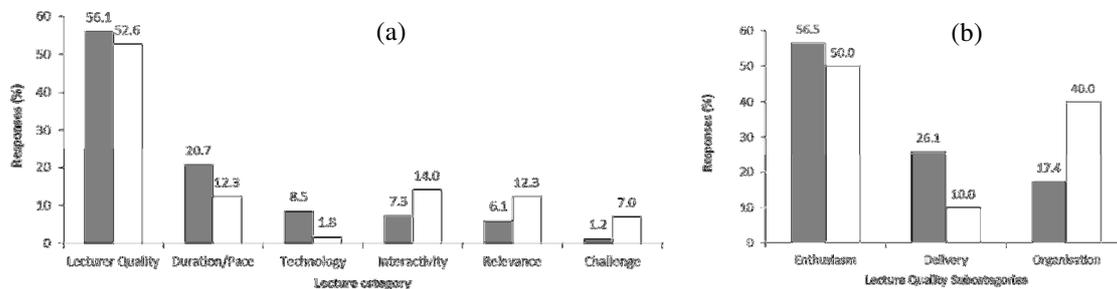

Figure 1: Percentage of survey responses for lectures by (a) category and (b) Lecturer subcategory showing categories having a positive (grey bars) and negative (white bars) impact on the respondents' engagement with the class. Numbers above the bars are percentages.

Respondents were positively engaged by lecturers that were excited, passionate, animated and enjoying the material being taught, which was contagious in the classroom. For example, "…the lecturer was quite excited about his subject too, and that came through, and made it more interesting" and "… a fantastic style of delivery, always animated and excited about the material…". In contrast, lecturers that lacked these qualities or appeared uninterested were not engaging.

In terms of delivery, the majority of positive responses related to the lecturer presenting the material concisely; in a straight forward, easily understandable way; and with clear explanations. However, injecting fun or light-heartedness into the lecture and speaking clearly were also mentioned. Poor delivery was almost exclusively identified as boring and uninspiring.

> …it was a struggle to turn up each week and listen to [the lecturer] … [who] sat down throughout the class and rarely moved, it made lectures very boring.

> …[The lecturer's] general tone was lulling most of us to sleep…

Lectures that were clean, methodical and stayed on topic were engaging, whilst respondents disliked lectures that were disorganised or rambling.

> …lectures were unorganised, all over the place, most discussions were off topic not relevant to the topic at hand, confusion amongst the group…

> I found it hard to concentrate at times…due to the lecturer jumping between topics…

Lack of engagement also arose from lectures in which extra material was introduced without notice; with multiple, or changing, lecturers during the course; or with lecturers that lacked personal organisation or did not maintain order in the class.

> …lecturer was quiet and could not hold the attention of the class as he did not assert himself…

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[The lecturer was] 10-15 minutes late which made you wonder why we should bother …[as he is] not giving the impression that the subject is a useful and interesting subject.

Both pace and duration impacted on engagement. Delivering material at a comprehensible pace was engaging, whilst too much material lead to "…information overload…". Similarly, "…pausing in between heavy chunks of info..." or implementing breaks in the middle of long lectures "…kept it interesting and didn't allow me to…lose focus".

Interactive lectures which included a variety of activities, such as short video clips and demonstrations, were engaging. Respondents also enjoyed opportunities for in-class discussions.

…the discussions with the lecturers/tutors and the students … that's what made lectures more interesting…

…group discussion of topics. It was really good to bounce ideas off each other.

In contrast, respondents were disengaged by a lack of any interaction, "…non-stop talking…" and situations where "…student feedback or interaction was rebuffed or ignored…".

The use of technology in support of lecture content, such as video clips, was positive, but more emphasis was placed on aids that brought lecture content to life, such as online simulations and participatory demonstrations.

…the lecturer manipulated graphs on his [tablet and] this enabled us to better understand how changes in the formula affected how the graph looked.

The appropriate use of existing learning technologies, such as well organised Blackboard sites and lecture recordings, also helped to keep students engaged.

The great thing was…the lectures were recorded to review and re-listen to later, enabling more concentration in class.

Respondents reported being more engaged if they could see the relevance of the material and if it was pitched at an appropriate level, as opposed to being too complex or overly simplified. Relevance was maximised through the use of analogies and relating material to everyday life or current events. The timing of constructing this relevance was also important.

…I had some difficulty comprehending where it fitted. It was only [in] the last three weeks that I could get a better picture.

Tutorials

Respondents were most positively engaged in tutorials that offered them an opportunity to consolidate material covered in the course (Figure 2a) with activities allowing revision/practice rated slightly higher than opportunities to clarify material (Figure 2b).
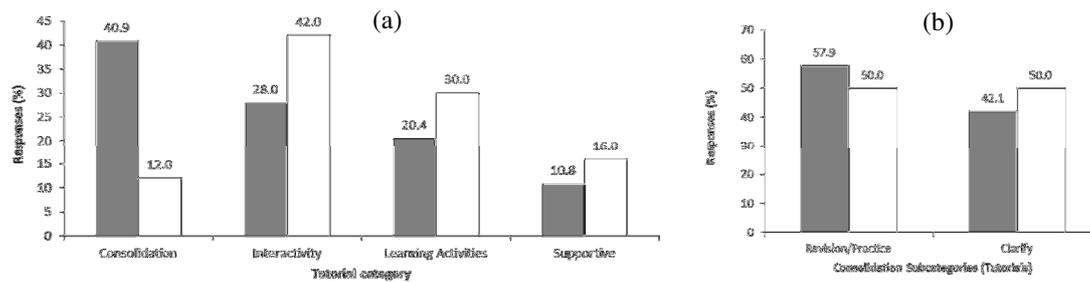
Figure 2: Percentage of survey responses for tutorials by (a) category and (b) Consolidation subcategory showing categories reported as having a positive (grey bars) and negative (white bars) impact on the respondents' engagement with the class. Numbers above the bars are percentages.

Although revision opportunities were largely viewed as positive, activities that failed to cater for a range of abilities were problematic.

> The tutorials were a basic work at your own speed timeslot, which left me little to do because I [finished early]…

Of almost equivalent value to revision, was the opportunity to ask questions to clarify lecture material, often with the advantage of more individualised support. Similarly, the absence of these opportunities was viewed negatively.

> …tutorials [were] quite helpful because I could ask all my questions there.

> …would have appreciated some time to ask questions.

Although ranking lower than consolidation as a positive tutorial experience, a lack of interactivity was the most important negative factor. This was due to a mix of tutorials that lacked discussion, imposed interactivity, or that became 'lecture-like'.

> The ones that forced groupwork or the like. It's bad when you get put into a group that's clearly all friends and you just sit there awkwardly…

> …the tutorials started as a back and forth with questions, but almost always morphed into a second lecture on the topic.

Tutorials that encouraged student interaction with each other, with teaching staff and the topic material were strongly favoured.

> …the discussions and debates, in a small class setting it really gets something out of everyone and I think that was always the highlight.

> I loved the class discussions…The ones where we were encouraged to form our own opinions and speak for ourselves and be validated in or thoughts was a great way to learn…

Although interactivity was important, respondents indicated a need for a variety of different activities, such as "…group activities … movie, internet research or books…". Variety that catered for student diversity was also valued, for example "…work to do in many different formats which covered each person's learning style". In contrast,

tutorials that do "…not have much variation. We look at the same style questions … each week" had a negative impact.

A supportive, collaborative learning environment was considered important. However, tutorials that did not support learning, either through the class environment or by their impact on students' self-efficacy, were disengaging.

> The smaller tutorial groups seemed more intimate and friendlier and I felt like I could relax more and concentrate more on my work. Praise from the tutor also helped me to be more interested.

> …I struggled with the level of disinterest and apathy from some of my fellow students…It was also hard personally staying motivated…

> …I felt pressured to come up with answers to questions when put on the spot. As a shy person, I found myself regretting having to attend this tutorial in fear of embarrassment of always getting answers wrong in front of the class.

Discussion

Tutorials are generally reported as being valuable, however there is little doubt that the traditional didactic lecture has limited, if any, use in today's tertiary system, both in terms of pedagogical value and student satisfaction. Nonetheless, institutions face a very different world to that of 30 years ago with an environment characterised by increased student numbers, higher student to staff ratios, changed student demographics and a changing technological landscape - all at a time when funding in real terms is decreasing (Phillips, 2005). Hence lectures, although they may change somewhat, are likely to remain one of the mainstays of higher education for the foreseeable future.

Therefore, there is a significant need to maximise the value of lectures and build on the utility of tutorials. The survey responses in this study clearly identify the features of lectures and tutorials that students consider engaging or not and these have contributed to the recommended practices provided later. However, to fully maximise their value it is important to consider them in conjunction with the benefits reported in the literature that students may derive from attending engaging classes and of the influence of new teaching methods and technologies.

Despite numerous studies, the verdict on lectures is variable. On the negative side, lectures have been reported as being notoriously boring with the lecturer simply talking at students (Clark, 2008), whilst 'poor' lectures are associated with decreased motivation to attend (Gysbers, Johnston, Hancock & Denyer, 2011). Additionally, students may attend or take notes, but do not necessarily think about the material or its meaning. On the contrary, other studies report that students can derive a learning benefit from attending lectures (Sleigh & Ritzer, 2001; Stanca, 2006; Powter, 2011). In fact, Lockwood, Guppy and Smyth (2005) found that students considered lectures to have greater overall value than study guides, online resources and practical classes. In terms of academic performance, attendance at lectures and tutorials in a mathematics course in the UoN Newstep program had a significant positive relationship on students' final marks (Powter, 2011).

Although poor lecture attendance is often blamed on students, this is overly simplistic and the role of the lecturer must be considered (Cleary-Holdforth, 2007). Despite some reasons for student non-attendance being trivial, Cameron (2011) found that lecture non-attendance was linked mainly to life pressures and lecturer qualities, with students voting

> …with their feet in a world where the battle for space in their lives means many do not prioritise lecture attendance as a key feature of their learning… (Cameron, 2011, p. 18).

Importantly initiative schemes to encourage lecture or tutorial attendance may do little to address the underlying issues and simply increase the number in attendance without guaranteeing engagement or an improvement in performance (Cleary-Holdforth, 2007). Together these elements raise the question of the value students place on these educational activities and, more importantly, on the assumption that they are inherently valuable.

Another important consideration is that the use of technology, including approaches such as flipped classrooms and blended learning, are not solutions to the previous problems (Miller, 2012). They are helpful in reframing the educator's role in the classroom and can provide an impetus to move from a didactic approach towards a greater focus on the student construction of knowledge (Miller, 2012). Nonetheless, they are merely tools and different approaches, not panaceas.

Hence lecture/tutorial quality, non-attendance, technology and new teaching approaches must first be considered with a strong focus on high quality teaching practices and ways to engage students. Only then should the tools and structures that support this to provide the best pedagogical outcomes be considered (Miller, 2012).

Obviously there are pedagogical imperatives, but are there other reasons why delivering classes that engage students are crucial in an enabling context? For some students, dropping out, not engaging or not attending can be linked to their perceptions of universities as alienating and rejecting places (Cameron, 2011). Many first year undergraduate students require support to be able to accept responsibility for their own learning, to develop self-efficacy and to appreciate the connection between their behaviour, such as attendance and engagement, and academic outcomes (Cameron, 2011). Additionally, UoN students reported that many factors, such as a sense of belonging and social events, were important, but they derived greater levels of satisfaction from meeting other students (31.8% of responses) and elements of their teaching and learning environment (41.5%), such as helpful, passionate staff and the enjoyment of learning (2013 Commencing Student Survey, UoN unpublished data).

Given that lectures are likely to remain a dominant form of university teaching for the foreseeable future, it is critical that lectures, irrespective of their mode or method, are conducted in a way that students perceive positively. This is critical for enabling students if they are to overcome previous educational disadvantage or inexperience and not feel alienated or rejected. Thus, the benefits of attending extend beyond the educational to those relating to self-efficacy, self-discipline, 'learning to learn' and retention.

The literature contains many benefits, all of considerable value for enabling students, which can arise if students perceive lectures and tutorials positively. Students reported lectures provided a better learning environment by enforcing discipline through attendance at scheduled classes and the need to concentrate in a "…scholarly community of learners." (Gysbers *et al*., 2011, p. 20). As such regular classes can provide an external motivation to maintain a structured study schedule whilst supporting good study habits and facilitating students' ability to keep pace with the material (Gysbers *et al*., 2011). Conversely, a reliance on other means of accessing the material, such as online resources, meant it was easier to procrastinate or study at the last minute and potentially exposed students to more distractions, such as Facebook, for example, when completing online lectures at home (Gysbers *et al*., 2011). First year students that do not attend and/or do not use the provided resources may also miss out on important opportunities for engaged learning (Cameron, 2011).

Importantly, face-to-face classes have positive social benefits, with seeing and hearing things live feeling more warm and alive (Gysbers *et al*., 2011). Students also benefit from personally interacting with friends, using peers to assist learning and being part of a learning community rather than being alone and isolated at home (Gysbers *et al*., 2011). Even though students may not take the opportunity, the ability to be able to ask questions was considered beneficial (Gysbers *et al*., 2011).

Finally, lecturers are in a pivotal position to influence students' self-efficacy and engagement with learning due to the attention that students place on lecturers (Cleary-Holdforth, 2007; and this study). This makes it essential that lecturers review or reflect on their own practices in terms of the ways they facilitate learning; by striving to foster enthusiasm for their subject and by adopting positive approaches that are inherently motivating and therefore enhance the students' desire to attend (Cleary-Holdforth, 2007).

Conclusions and recommended practices

There is a real risk that the strong messages denouncing lectures, espousing new teaching approaches and encouraging the use of technology may shift our attention from quality teaching practices to one where these changes are viewed as solutions. Bad teaching, irrespective of its form or delivery style, will not engage students. However, properly constructed and delivered lectures can, and do, motivate students, but the challenge is to identify what works and what does not (Lohman, 2012). The potential benefits for enabling students of getting this right speak for themselves.

The recommended practices set out below are distilled from the students' responses and apply to both lectures and tutorials.

Delivery and organisation

Include some humour and light-heartedness in your classes and, most importantly, clearly display your interest, excitement, passion and enthusiasm. Make explanations clear, consider using analogies and watch for signs that students understand. Provide ample opportunities for questions and to revise, practice or consolidate material. Deliver classes that have a clear purpose, both to you and the students, and are

organised. Stick closely to the plan, but provide advance warning or an explanation, if this is not possible.

Duration and pace

Break up the class, particularly lectures, to avoid long time spans and information overload as well as between difficult or complex tasks/content. Maximum concentration time is not more than 20 minutes (Sandhu, Afifi and Amara, 2012), so inserting some different types of stimulation will offset inattention and ineffective learning.

Interactivity

As much as possible, classes should include activities that allow students to participate, explore and interact with each other and the material. Allow students to discuss and debate course material to encourage them to be active, critical learners. However, avoid imposing interaction on students. There is no limit to the ways this can be done, so experiment or search the literature for ideas.

Relevance and challenge

Make a point of showing the relevance of the material whenever possible by relating it to real life examples or current events. Avoid building towards a goal or other destination without letting students know this is occurring at the outset. Failing to do so may lead to the point being missed or disconnected from the process by which it was reached. Bear in mind that enabling classes often contain a broad spectrum of abilities, so watch for students that may be missing out – either being left behind or under-stimulated – and consider ways of addressing this.

Technology and different teaching approaches

View these only as tools and not as solutions. Used wisely, technology and different teaching methods can help in all of the above areas, but they still require a foundation of quality teaching to be effective.

Self-reflection and review

Finally, some of these recommendations may not be easy to implement, but the benefits of trying are worth it. They should also be considered only as a first step and need to be supported by lecturers regularly seeking student feedback to incorporate into an ongoing process of personal and course review and reflection.

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