

ICE

INSTRUCTOR / COURSE
EVALUATION
TIPS

IMPROVING ACADEMIC TEACHING

ICE Factor 2

Instructor Enthusiasm

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The following suggestions for enhancing teaching and learning are keyed to sections of the Instructor/Course Evaluation (ICE), an instrument adopted for the evaluation of teaching at Saint Mary's University and based on the Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ). The ICE factors teaching into nine components, eight of which provide formative information that can be used to improve teaching and learning.

The following suggestions were adapted by Professor Herbert W. Marsh, University of Western Sydney - Macarthur, Australia (developer of the SEEQ) with permission from: Davis, B. G., Wood, L., & Wilson, R. (1983). ABC's of Teaching with Excellence. Teaching Innovation and Evaluation Services, University of California. Minor changes in language were made by Professor Beverly Cameron (University Teaching Services, University of Manitoba) to fit the Canadian context. Teaching Tips is reprinted with permission.

Current resources related to the eight formative ICE factors are available from the Office of Instructional Development, Saint Mary's University. Copies of the ICE questionnaire are available from the Senate Office.

Instructor Enthusiasm (ICE Factor 2): A minimal condition for learning is that attention be aroused. The extent to which a stimulus (i.e., actions by a teacher) stands out against a background is known to be crucial in evoking interest and attention. It is to be expected, therefore, that teachers who impress students with their enthusiasm, dynamism and energy and who make judicious use of humour will have students who are interested and attentive. Moreover, teacher enthusiasm can vicariously induce enthusiasm for the subject in students. Highly rated teachers are more likely to serve as models for student behaviour toward a subject. Thus, a teacher's enthusiasm can be acquired by students. Students whose interest in and enthusiasm for a subject are aroused are likely to learn more about the subject. The instructor's enthusiasm is especially relevant to the principle that learners must be motivated to learn.

Improving Academic Teaching

Instructor Enthusiasm

The following ideas and suggestions have been used by outstanding university instructors.

1. Focus on five or six different students each day and give your lecture as if you were talking to them individually.

Many speech teachers encourage people to think of a lecture as an enlarged or public conversation. Several excellent lecturers told us that they lecture to a large class (50-200 students) in the same way they talk to a few students. “By focusing on a few students, I am more relaxed and informal. This helps me to concentrate more on the ideas I want to convey than the impression I may be making,” one teacher said. “I think that, as a result, I speak with more expression and conviction.”

2. Exaggerate everything about your presentation in a large auditorium class.

A professor of Economics believes that physical exaggeration and a bit of hyperbole are keys to success in lecturing in a very large auditorium. “You have to remember that 800 students constitutes an audience, not a class in the normal sense. In front of a very large audience, everything you would do in lecturing to a class of 30 or even 100 looks small, stiff, and formal. You have to exaggerate everything, make it all ‘larger than life,’ if you want to capture an audience. In our very large introductory course, I stride the stage with long steps, I make sweeping gestures, I ask broad rhetorical questions and make ridiculous puns, I pound the lectern and raise and lower my voice, and I make frequent use of simple graphs projected on a movie-size screen.”

“In my smaller classes, of course, I do none of these. A teacher can get away with gross generalizations in a very large lecture setting; in fact, exaggerations can even enhance student learning in that environment. Students know the difference, and they appreciate a teacher’s adaptation of pedagogical style to different settings.”

3. Look for ways to relate the course material as a story.

“I always try to tell some kind of story,” says a teacher in the Biological Sciences. “My primary belief about communication is that it doesn’t matter what you say if you can’t get them to listen.”

In describing his preparation for a lecture for a large class he says, “Because I already know the material very well, most of the preparation goes on in my head for several days. Then, the night before I begin to concentrate on it very intensely; it’s a little like the ‘psyching yourself up’ that actors or football players describe before a performance or a big game. Then I begin to outline the lecture, focusing on the major points and how they might be told as a story.”

4. Vary the pace and type of instructional activities in a course.

One excellent teacher says that he conducts each class meeting differently “to keep my students off balance. Students always know what topic will be covered in a given session,” he says, “but they don’t always know how it will be handled.”

An English teacher also believes that his wide variety of teaching strategies accounts for his high ratings on interesting style of presentation. “I read whatever I can find on teaching in my discipline, and I borrow shamelessly from other instructors when it comes to pedagogical strategies.”

Some of the variations used by excellent teachers include: student panel discussions, guest speakers, slides, films, overhead transparencies, blackboard work with colored chalk, role-playing and simulations, and a wide variety of group discussion techniques.

5. Begin your lecture with a “joke of the week,” especially in large early Monday morning classes.

One lecturer admits that his jokes are pretty bad, but finds that students appreciate his efforts anyway. “I hate Mondays and I hate early mornings even more. A joke related to the course content, to education, or to life in general tends to help get everyone awake.”

The source of his jokes? “One source is the students themselves. I encourage students to bring me jokes I can use. In that way my ‘bad’ jokes are their ‘bad’ jokes as well.”

6. Invite guest speakers to your course.

An English professor sometimes invites professional actors to talk about their interpretation of a scene or a role from a play the students are studying. “It’s very important to make clear to a guest what you expect of him or her in order to ensure that the class is an educational experience for your students.”

“I always take detailed notes during a guest lecture,” says a professor in Biological Sciences. “In that way I am able to answer student questions about the material during later sessions and may learn something new myself!”

An Architecture professor talks to guest speakers well in advance so that they know exactly what is expected of them. “Practicing architects are asked to submit working drawings, models, photos, and publications on one of their buildings so that students can be well acquainted with their work beforehand.”

“Students are asked to submit a set of questions to a guest speaker beforehand about his/her work. Designated students are given responsibility to see that these questions are addressed to the speaker.” This professor also makes a point to confirm the time and place of the guest’s presentation, provides a map of the campus, arranges for campus parking, and promptly sends each speaker a thank-you letter.

7. Focus your lectures around a common object, event, or phenomenon which exemplifies the major concepts of the course.

A lecturer in the Biological Sciences calls this his “potato lecture.” “Biology is an empirical discipline; it depends on observation and investigation. I pass out potatoes to all 700 students in the class and begin a Socratic dialogue about the kinds of things they can observe about their potato. I have to overcome their previous experiences,” he explains. “Although potatoes are familiar objects to them, they (the students) don’t have the foggiest idea what a potato is. I stress what you can get from everyday experiences by asking the right questions. I poll students on their observations, help them ask questions and describe ways they could investigate answers. An interactive exercise around a common phenomenon tends to ‘break the ice’ between faculty and students even in a large lecture course. After the lecture, some students cook their potatoes and others plant them. Months later, I still get stopped by students who want to tell me how their potatoes are doing.”

8. Begin class with an incident, example, or anecdote to get your students’ attention.

A lecturer in History often begins by reading aloud a short passage from a primary source or a story to illustrate the major theme or point in the lecture. “For example, I start out by stating that the Wizard of Oz is a parable for progressivism and read passages from it to illustrate my major thesis. I then get my students to help identify the different characters and what they represent. I usually end with a quotation that pulls together what I have been trying to say. Also whenever possible, I try to link the past with current events, to show how the topic is important for the present.”

9. “Open with gusto” and “Finish strong.”

Professor Otis Lancaster of the University of Pennsylvania points out the advantages of giving special thought to beginning and ending each lecture. “The opening should secure students’ attention and give them the desired mental set. Get off to a good start. Do something to command attention from the outset. Put punch into your opening.”

“Having some form of attention-getter - a gadget or piece of hardware whose operation depends upon the principles of the day’s lesson usually excites attention. Carefully planned questions or statements can also develop the curiosity necessary to get students’ attention.”

“Action is always an attention-getter. If you intend to use charts or models for demonstration, have these carried to the front of the class after students are assembled; or keep charts covered until class starts. This will usually whet students’ curiosity and make them eager to see what is going to happen.”

“The ending is as important as the beginning. Don’t let a class session fade into nonexistence. Make an impressive ending. For example, end with: (1) a question for the class to cogitate and answer before next meeting; (2) a quotation conveying the essential theme; (3) a summary; (4) a miniature review (keep it brief); or (5) what to do before the next class.” (From Lancaster, Otis E., *Effective Teaching and Learning*, N.Y.: Gordon and Breach, 1974, pp. 122-24.).

10. Learn to vary the pitch or inflection of your voice.

If students complain that you lecture in a monotone, you may want to try one of the following: taking speech lessons, joining an organization like Toastmasters, taking acting lessons, joining (or organizing) a poetry or drama reading group, or simply practicing reading aloud to yourself or members of your family. Each of these methods has been used effectively by one or more University of California - Berkeley faculty.

One lecturer combined speech lessons with Bible readings at his church with good effect. Another took an acting class on campus during the summer, and not only improved his vocal delivery in the classroom but enjoyed himself as well. Several lecturers recommended joining a poetry-reading group. "Reading poetry aloud can be particularly helpful because poetry requires greater vocal inflection for its meaning to become clear," one said. Reading plays aloud with friends or family can also be an enjoyable means of practicing vocal variety.

11. Wear a microphone and remember to "talk to the back row" if you have a tendency to speak too softly.

By remembering to talk to the back row, you will be more likely to adapt your voice to groups of different sizes. Note however, that although you want to project your voice to the back row your eye contact with students should vary over several sections of the room. If you look at the back row as well as talk to it, you will appear excessively distant and formal.

12. Build deliberate and purposeful pauses into your lectures.

A Zoology professor stresses the importance of the pause as a rhetorical device. "When I want to emphasize a point, I always pause until the audience is absolutely silent (it makes my students uncomfortable). Then when I have their full attention, I proceed to make the point."

13. Practice your lecture communication skills in front of a mirror.

This recommendation comes from a professor of Zoology who was a champion debater in college. "Even today, I frequently rehearse my classroom lectures or research presentations in front of the mirror. Of course, you want to do this in private. It makes you very self-conscious at first, but I find it an excellent way to practice communication skills."

14. Make diagnostic and practice audio tapes.

Although the audio quality of most home tape recordings is not good enough to diagnose fine points of pitch, inflection, articulation, and pronunciation, it can be used effectively to note whether you speak too slowly or too rapidly, whether you vary your tone and inflection sufficiently to hold your students' attention and communicate meaning, and whether you articulate clearly and/or forcefully enough to be heard and understood.

Audio tapes can also be used to check the organization of your lecture presentation and the clarity of your explanations. Repeated audio taping will also allow you to monitor your improvement on any of these variables.

15. Use your students to monitor your presentation.

If you want an in-class reminder of when you are speaking too softly, too rapidly, or without sufficient articulation to be heard and understood, ask one or more of your students, a TA, or colleague to sit in the last row and give you a pre-determined signal whenever your voice cannot be heard or your speed or delivery or articulation makes it difficult to understand what you are saying.

16. Colour-code your lecture notes with cues to “slow down”, “pause and get attention,” “demonstrate with gestures,” or other stage directions.

One of several lecturers who does this says, “Because I have a tendency to speak too rapidly, I find these colour-codes helpful as cues to slow down when introducing a new idea, explaining a concept, or summarizing major ideas and the relationships between them. This also frees me to speak at my own normal fast clip when making transitions or giving examples.

17. Use the blackboard as a ‘brake’.

One lecturer who uses the blackboard (or an overhead projector with a roll of acetate film) extensively during her lectures reports that she purposely does so to force herself to slow down. “I have a tendency to speak very rapidly,” she says, “and because this course covers many basic concepts, it is imperative that I slow down in order to allow students to absorb what I am saying and to take reasonable lecture notes. One of the best ways I have found to do this is to outline my lectures as I go along. I also write out all important concepts, keywords for definitions or important examples, and diagram various relationships at the time I am discussing them. I try to plan my boardwork ahead so that there will be enough space, and I use coloured chalk to differentiate concepts and highlight relationships.”

“I find that because it takes me much longer to write than to speak, writing on the blackboard is like an automatic ‘brake’. Also, I get fewer student complaints about my lecture pace because the main concepts and processes are on the board, visually reinforcing what I am saying.”

18. Use dramatic pauses and repetition to draw students’ attention to the main ideas.

Several teachers stress the need for repetition (using different language or examples) to communicate the most important points in their lectures.

Dramatic pauses are another way to highlight important ideas. A History professor says that she used to tell her students, “The main point is...” but she said it in a matter-of-fact manner, almost as an aside. “I discovered that many of my students did not get the message,” she explains. “Now I indicate a main point by pausing to get my students’ full attention and then saying emphatically,

“This is the really important consideration!” Then I pause again to be sure they are prepared to write it down. If not, I restate the importance of what is to follow.”

A Sociology professor also uses dramatic pauses and a sense of timing to stress the most important points in his lectures. “I structure each lecture to build up to the crucial point of the topic. Then I announce it in a sweeping manner, timed to occur at the end of the class period.”

19. Videotape a segment of your class.

Several professors have had their classes videotaped. One Zoology professor has had his lectures videotaped many times. “The first time was a shattering experience,” he says, “but it is the most effective kind of feedback you can get. I have found videotape invaluable for getting rid of annoying mannerisms, for learning to vary the speed of my delivery and to put more expression and greater clarity into my explanations.”

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