

# It's called a lecture *theatre*!

## Reflections on large-class student engagement

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### **Rationale**

Teacher enthusiasm and student engagement are key predictors of student motivation, successful learning and development of new knowledge (Patrick et al., 2000). Embedding creativity and innovation in the teaching experience is therefore critical to foster engagement and enhance acquisition of key learning outcomes. But, as Amabile famously argues in 'How to kill creativity' (1998), creativity is often seriously impeded in corporate and academic organisations in order to reinforce business imperatives such as productivity, uniformity of delivery of services, and control. Higher education is no exception: Walder (2015) identifies a number of barriers to innovation and, thereby, to student engagement in universities.

### **Objectives**

The aim of this presentation is to reflect on how university lecturers can generate student engagement in teacher-led, large-class teaching (i.e., classical lectures to 100+ students) where there is limited scope for group work and lively debate. The basic idea is to approach the lecture theatre as a *theatre* rather than a *teaching room*. The ideas and recommendations are based on critical reflection of the presenter's student evaluations and a student council nomination for Most Innovative Teaching (2013).

### **Findings**

The storyline is likely the most important aspect to get right. Plays and movies are engaging because there is an evolving story, which makes the audience curious about what comes next. Lectures based on textbooks are often entirely predictable, because (i) the (good) student has already read the story/text, and (ii) the lecturer follows and repeats the textbook, perhaps even using the polished slides and cases that come with the textbook. The adoption of narrative models used in plays and movies can greatly enhance the structuring of the lecture material and prompt the lecturer to devise exercises or change style of presentation, which will generate attention and stimulate a sense of unpredictability.

Activation of multiple senses is key to effective learning (Kátai et al., 2008). Audio material such as music is readily available and highly underutilised. By opening my large-class marketing lectures with themed music, I have managed to create a point of difference that sets the lectures apart in the student mind-set and gives the students a chance to settle down and tune in.

Props are an effective way of embedding learning in tangible objects. Marketing teaching easily lends itself to the use of props (e.g., products), but all subject areas have an empirical field from which objects can be sourced and included in the teaching. The inclusion of props adds interest, breaks the flow of the story and provides a tangible hook, which connects theoretical learning with a relevant area of practise.

Costumes are, of course, an inherent part of theatre and obviously available to lecturers. I do utilise this theatrical element, though as subtle as I can. By making conscious changes to what I wear when lecturing, I try to emphasise certain themes or instil a certain attitude towards a particular subject.

Key barriers to innovation and student engagement in large-class teaching are addressed (Cachia et al., 2010; Hockings 2005; Walder 2015).

### References

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