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**Studying for a degree in a pure or applied biological science?**  
**"What makes the best learning experience for you?"**

12 noon, eyelids drooping, are you awake? Asleep? The words on the screen mean nothing, 'bacterial biosensors'? What are they? Must be a dream. If only I had proof. I gaze across the pallid room but see only student-shaped heaps and the living dead. I conclude I must be asleep, but then a sharp pain in my wrist induces the depressing realisation that I am in fact awake, and have been copying words from screens since 9 am.

I look at the words but don't know what they are, let alone what they mean. Why am I here? No-one else seems to be. They obviously made the correct choice at 8:10 this morning and 'didn't hear' the alarm of doom. I mentally slap myself into reality. 'Come on, this is interesting, the cutting edge of scientific knowledge and understanding, I do care, I do... hold on, am I awake?'

Then comes the moment everyone (who is awake) dreads... 'The Question'. You don't know what the question is because your hearing closed down half an hour ago. There definitely was a question though, because she's staring straight at you expectantly, along with the 'awake' portion of the lecture theatre.

'Pardon?' you suggest, non-committal. You might as well not have bothered because you are still no further forward. You stare 'thoughtfully' between the screen and your page of scrawl and say nothing, absolutely nothing, hoping the one single biology die-hard will shout out the answer for you.

Once over, the stress keeps you attentive for a whole minute and a half: then... 'am I awake?'

Two hundred students, 50 absent, 40 hung over, 10 still drunk from night before, 30 ill, 40 asleep and the remainder staring at the screen. Just to clarify, not '*learning*', just staring. Is it any wonder though? I challenge anyone to sit there and listen to a stuttering, monosyllabic, inarticulate professor for an hour and come away feeling inspired. How can you when they don't even seem to be inspired themselves? Some don't even look like they believe what they're saying is true! Others are clearly there purely to rub their doctorate in your face because they know you'll never get one.

I guess the key word in this title question is 'studying'. After all, that is what we are here to do, allegedly. It involves commitment, determination, rigor and enjoyment. How can you make yourself 'study' for hours, days and ultimately years, if you don't enjoy it? Enjoyment itself is hard to define. Some find it in understanding, in completion, or success, while for others it's the little moment by moment things which drive you towards your goal. Either way, enjoyment has roots in lectures and lectures are dependent on lecturers.

A bad lecturer has the power to strike fear, panic, stress, boredom and despondency into every cell of your body, while a good one has the potential to shape your mind and touch your soul. A lecturer who stands confidently before you and cares about what he is saying is worth ten of one who simply slumps and mutters about nothingness. It is a challenge, I grant you, to be the focus and reference point for a theatre of hormonal youths, but those who master it are respected and remembered, along with the knowledge they present.

You cannot define what a good lecturer is, but looking back at the ones who have made an impact on me, there are definite similarities. The largest of these being humour. 'Humour'? I hear you cry! In a lecture? A lecture about serious discoveries and detailed methodologies? Yes. Humour is directly related to enjoyment. Some of the best lectures I've had have been more like stand-up than education. The best example I can recall is an invertebrate lecture where a near-retirement, Welsh tutor lay flat on his back on the desk and demonstrated in considerable detail the feeding mechanism of a barnacle. There was no need for it, *PowerPoint* could quite easily have produced a *Times New Roman* paragraph on it, an inaudible voice could have murmured it at us, but would I have remembered it a year on?

Simple things like short video clips, physical objects to look at, or just a two-minute non-note-taking aside or anecdote is enough to break up the monotony and keep the attention of the class. The odd joke or play on words keeps us awake and attentive, which in turn makes us more willing to concentrate on the lecture itself. Knowing when to give up ten minutes early because everyone is asleep has the opposite effect of lessening our degree. It shows that you understand how we are feeling and that in itself drives us to attend the next lecture and try to improve our understanding because we know that you care and are there to help.

Safety is an issue too. Not the 'holding a thermometer correctly', or 'wearing the right goggles' safety, but the emotional safety of not being picked on to answer questions in lectures, not having to expose your lack of understanding to a hundred intellectuals and the like. Making yourself and your lectures approachable and not intimidating is a huge step towards the ideal learning environment, *encouraging* understanding and participation instead of individualising personal weaknesses.

Lectures like these mean I can leave the theatre inspired and keen to start the ever increasing mountain of required reading. I can look forward to getting up at 8:10 on cold grey mornings and trekking in the rain to my next lecture. I can study, and enjoy it. A well paced, clearly presented lecture, with animated staff and plenty of visual aids is, if only for me, the key to a good learning experience. Oh yeah, and did I mention humour?!