

“How does the experience of your course compare with any expectations you may have had?”

‘Learning to use your intuition is learning to be your own teacher.’
Vaughan

It feels like a lifetime ago I was sat in a classroom calling teachers ‘sir’ or ‘madam’, with only the occasional piece of homework to amuse me. Nowadays, my vocabulary has extended to Doctor, and Professor, and this so called “homework” is really what’s going to earn my degree.

But what did I really expect in my course? And what have I experienced?

‘It is not the biggest, the brightest or the best that will survive, but those who adapt the quickest.’
Charles Darwin

Before I arrived at university, I had always heard stories about how university is a fantastic experience, one that I wouldn’t regret. In fact, I remember everyone saying those same few words to that effect. As well as my interest in Biology, there was always an odd curiosity that had drawn me to university, to find out how it could have such an impact on so many people. One of the main things I knew after finishing my A-levels was that Biology at a university level would be a big step up, and there would be many changes.

The Lectures / Seminars

‘I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught.’
Winston Churchill

Lecture theatres have replaced those little classrooms of many years ago. I did expect the lecture theatres to be just that – theatres; carefully angled – with desks only just able to place a sheet of A4 paper on. I did not however expect the lectures to be theatrical shows.

Who’d have guessed that every day we get to see our very own play related to bioscience?!

The lecturers themselves are the sole actors or actresses, be they - happy clowns, mimes, or drama queens – their sole purpose is to get across the subject for us - the audience – to absorb.

Lectures are generally very formal, and they are the simplest way of transferring a mass of information to a large number of students.

The Lecturers

‘A little nonsense now and then, is cherished by the wisest men.’
Roald Dahl

The core behind the entire course is the lecturer. It is very difficult to teach hundreds of students and get the same precise point across to all of them. I have to admit, I didn’t expect a barrel of laughs, or any humour of any kind, and I certainly didn’t expect to hear song about Oil Seed Rape at 9am – but as insane as singing was – I still remember what the lecture was about.

Sometimes you forget that lecturers themselves are human.

Strangely enough, the more bizarre or extreme a lecturer is, the better. Good lecturers use a good mix of simple audible, visual, and kinaesthetic aids when teaching. Occasionally humour or utter insanity makes something more memorable, but is not essential.

Although there are bad lecturers, I have to admit it's a pretty daunting task to stand in front of hundreds of students and get the same point across to every one of them.

"Not too cryptic please..."

"Not too funny please..."

"Not too monotone..."

The list goes on...

Personally, I have experienced a whole variety of different teaching styles, and I must stress that at the end of the day – university is partly about self progression, self learning – and when you don't understand something – it's time to hit the books...

Then again, maybe that was their plan all along!

Practical Work / Field Work

'Don't go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail'
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Visiting the practical laboratories on an open day many years ago, I was stunned as to how vast they were. There was a practical class at the time, and the students were busy working away at something seemingly incomprehensible to me and the others around me. At the time I thought they must have been making genetic hybrids of bacteria, or at least trying to suss out whether fungi are necessary for plant growth... Well, a year later – I wondered whether I should've told the open day students we were doing a serial dilution, but I'm sure they've found out by now!

Practical classes allow hands on with all biological aspects to allow us to get a true insight into what's really going on. It's far easier to see the siphons of a mussel when you physically cut one open and see for yourself.

Field work has that added bonus of being in the great outdoors. To visually see the different sampling techniques used enables a better understanding of what they're all about. I'd have never guessed digging up soil could be such a tedious task, or, that finding dinosaur footprints could be so easy... when you know where to look.

The Students

'The human is a walking paradox. We want to be free, completely individual on the one hand, and we want to belong on the other hand. We want to be part of a flock but at the same time, you want to be you.'
Kjell and Jonas

There would be no course without students, and admittedly, I did not know what to expect from the students.

Having always assumed university would be about "self" progression, I had tended to believe it was done *alone*.

Of course, I realised that it is far more than that. Help was needed to realize it at first (to which I am grateful to this day), but it is necessary to understand that everyone is working to the same goal.

It is far easier to tackle questions on quantitative genetics with more than one brain.

No-one is ever "better" than anyone else; sometimes I forget that my peers – like me – have done exceptionally well to get into university, and we should respect one another for that.

If anything - just like those that convinced me that university is a great experience. Any experiences I have gained through my course have improved me as a whole – to start thinking like a biologist, and not just a student.

'Each individual brain is more like a unique and unimaginably dense rain forest, teeming with growth and decay. It is less like a programmed machine than an ecological habitat that mimics the evolution of life itself.'

Gerald M Edelman (Nobel Prize winner 1972)