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

My academic background dictated perhaps my most daunting experience in higher education: the realisation that at University I would be just another face in a lecture room. In a school where the same biology teacher taught me for 5 years, from the fragile age of 13 to the self-evaluating end of adolescence, I grew to value the concept of a relationship with the people who endeavoured to share some of their knowledge and experience with me.

However, as an Environmental Science student, who has to spend long hours in a lab and go on field trips, I had the pleasure of knowing some of my lecturers at a more personal level so as to be able to at least exchange a friendly smile with them in corridors or lecture rooms. Indeed, when lecturers are friendly and approachable and make sincere efforts to make themselves available for queries and problems, despite their pressing schedule, my appreciation for what they teach tends to grow. Being able to approach a tutor or lecturer with the results of my research highlight in my academic conscience the need to be punctual in my planning, precise in my objectives, industrious in my methods.

And yet motivating oneself to adhere to good personal research and study habits is not the least challenging as to stimulate one's interest in lectures. A good method that can be employed to keep an audience's attention is humour. One of my lecturers who taught introductory genetics used to make entertaining comments about DNA sequencing methods and about how they were invented, that led me to have real interest in what I was learning.

Another factor that gives me real motivation in my learning is to see the relevance of what I am taught. There have been times when I sat in a lecture room wondering what the point of the lecture was. However, I have seen that my science deals with real problems that call for real solutions. One of my modules that demonstrated this very concept was entitled Environmental Measurement. I found it very useful because it didn't only deal with sampling and analysis methods of the environment but it included examples of how I can actually apply those methods in a real job situation. Our instructors clearly explained practical matters that environmental agencies and consultation organisations might have to deal with when assigned to a monitoring programme, or an environmental survey. They mentioned the financial and legal considerations of accessing a polluted area as well as how to present and use the results to propose solutions to problems, albeit with the teaching concentrating on the scientific methods. Another of my modules showed me how environmental modelling could be successfully used in decision-making but also what social and other aspects are involved.

The element of challenge also keeps me interested in my learning. How is this achieved? Well, I am given assignments but also a choice of themes and I am left to research what is available to decide what appeals to me, what supports my ideas or in fact if what I have found changes my

mind or helps me make my mind up. At times I am also asked to work in a team, decide on the position I want to support, find the appropriate arguments to do so and still achieve a common ground with all the members of the team. In effect, I imagine that one of my favourite experiences would be one that is currently unfolding, the attempt to produce a scientific journal supplement in a team of eleven peers. Though, I know I am faced with yet another challenge I expect it to be a rather educational one.

Clearly, a number of elements contribute to a good learning experience. If I would sum them up in two words those would be, motivation and challenge. After three semesters of university life and happily, yet stressfully entering the fourth one, I ask myself what of all the things I have learned is the most important. There is one that comes to mind, that I am learning how to teach myself. I am learning how to sieve the huge amount of information available to me and choose the most up to date and the most relevant for me. So my best learning experience is that I am educating myself while at the same time I have a lot of support from experienced and most of the times approachable, tutors and lectures.