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

There are only a certain number of times that you can sit in a lecture theatre and hear someone talking to you about the intricate details of mitochondria, the complex vagaries of an immunoglobulin or various other intangible concepts without thinking that it is just a little dull and frustrating. Science, particularly biological science, has a peculiar place within the vista of avenues available to students when choosing which degree to embark upon and invest at least three years of their life into. With few exceptions it endeavours to make real an assortment of elusive and unyielding ideas: this is the challenge that faces each and every lecture.

It must be remembered that a biology lecture is not just a lecture but a very distinct organism; it requires a healthy balance of information and exciting delivery, mixed in with an obvious enthusiasm for the topic without digressing onto other subjects. It is a veritable homeostatic system but a fragile one. A slight imbalance can send it sliding into an inevitable death spiral. This is where the lecturer must step up to the breach and take responsibility for the next two hours of one hundred students' lives. If they keep a cool head and prepare themselves then they can turn those two hours into a voyage of discovery as opposed to a tedious wander through a complex and inaccessible theme.

The question is: what are the tools at the disposal of the intrepid lecturer to create the best learning experience? The answers are simple. Every journey is easier when you know where you are going, a few moments taken at the start of a session to explain the contents of the lecture are invaluable. This can give students a glimmer of hope at their lowest ebb because they know that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that the low will not last for long. In a similar vein a map is always good, or in the case of the lecture; handouts. There is nothing worse than being presented with and asked to copy an inevitably complex diagram on an overhead or PowerPoint presentation when it could so easily have been handed out beforehand. These are simple touches that can make the world of difference.

The final challenge is to put the lecture material into perspective, only when this is done can the student have a completely fulfilling and effective experience. This is a much trickier prospect than simply attracting and retaining students attention because, as informative as it would be, it is not possible to shrink people down to the molecular level to actually witness the spectacular interactions taking place. That is not to mention the health and safety issues this would produce.

Instead the answer to this conundrum is two-fold. Firstly, it is of utmost importance that students be able to get into the laboratory at every possible opportunity to test and put into practice the

ideas they have been taught about in lectures. This means that the theoretical models that have been discussed in class can be seen at work giving a more distinct reference to the process and expanding and consolidating the work that has been done.

However, this is not always possible and when this is the case the next best thing is a well structured case study. If the case study is intriguing and can be related to by the student, for example a study taken from current affairs, it will help to stimulate interest and retain attention, which is essential for a full and satisfying learning experience.

Therefore, in my opinion the best learning experience is provided when the lecturer and lecture is well organised and structured and learning is supplemented through interesting and relevant relation to life experiences either through practical application or case studies.