



## Ten Top tips to liven up your lectures!

*Phil Porter and Suzanne Fergus*

*School of Life and Medical Sciences*

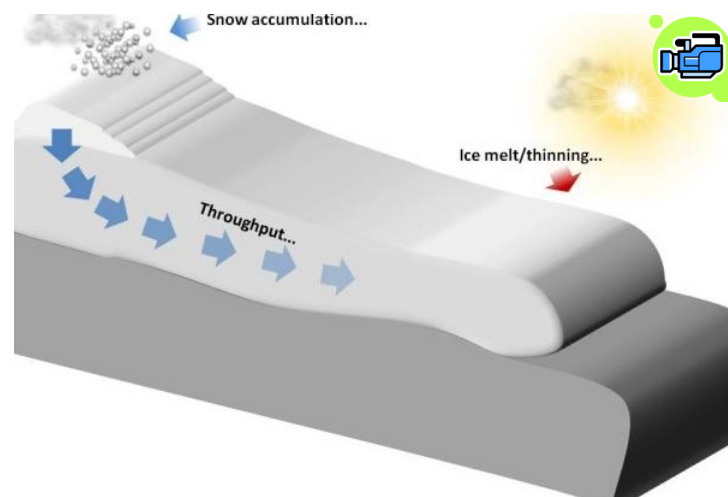
University of Hertfordshire

Like it or not, many of us will deliver the bulk of our teaching to large groups through the traditional lecture format. The advantages and disadvantages of this teaching format continue to be discussed and debated at length, but it is clear that one of the challenges with teaching large groups is to maintain student engagement. The following are our top ten tips to assist in maintaining student engagement.



### **Get animated! Phil Porter.**

Using visual animations in lectures can be a powerful tool to assist in explaining complex or abstract concepts. This can be particularly useful when trying to engage students with research, when the complexities of our research may make this material relatively inaccessible for students. Clearly the use of on-screen animations can also assist visual learners and anecdotal evidence indicates that overseas students find the use of animations to be particularly useful.



Given that most of us will be using PowerPoint for presenting our lectures, the use of the powerful animation tools embedded within the package is an obvious starting point and the image above shows one such animation created in PowerPoint (click on the image to see the animation in action). Using PowerPoint to create animations is simple, quick to learn, maintains low file sizes (as opposed to embedding movie clips into a slide) and avoids the need to learn a new package. Step-by-step guidance on how to create animations in PowerPoint can be found in the [June 2009](#) and [March 2010](#) editions of Blended Learning in Practice.



### **No more death by PowerPoint! Phil Porter.**

Staying with PowerPoint, clearly it is a wonderful teaching tool, if used appropriately. However, if your lecture comprises slide after slide after slide of text/bullet point-based detail then the audience is liable to rapidly switch off! The tongue in cheek slide below illustrates an extreme example!

### **An uninspiring PowerPoint slide**

- Welcome to the first in a series of 65 deeply uninspiring slides.
- I'm going to agonisingly show you one line at a time...
- and when all six lines on this slide have come and gone...
- there will be another slide with exactly the same design and another six lines...
- but don't worry, because there are another 63 to enjoy after that one...
- by which time you will have completely switched off and will doubtless be updating your Facebook status on your smart phone or worse, thinking about changing your degree course...

Liven up slides with imagery and animations or insert a few Electronic Voting Systems (EVS) slides to give students a short break and allow them to assess their knowledge. You could also ditch the PowerPoint altogether and experiment with a package such as Prezzi (see: [www.prezi.com/](http://www.prezi.com/)) or be radical and teach the way we used to teach 30 years ago, with no visual aids beyond a whiteboard/chalkboard and pen/piece of chalk! After all, any of us really ought to be able to deliver a lecture should the technology fail, but how many of us really ever prepare for this eventuality?



### 8 Break it up. Suzanne Fergus.

Student performance and attention has been shown to decline over the duration of a lecture (Figure 1). Students may be recording fewer notes and these notes may be less accurate and contain fewer key ideas. This phenomenon of rapidly declining attention is most dominant when the attention task is passive. In situations where the learner is actively involved, attention is not affected to the same extent.

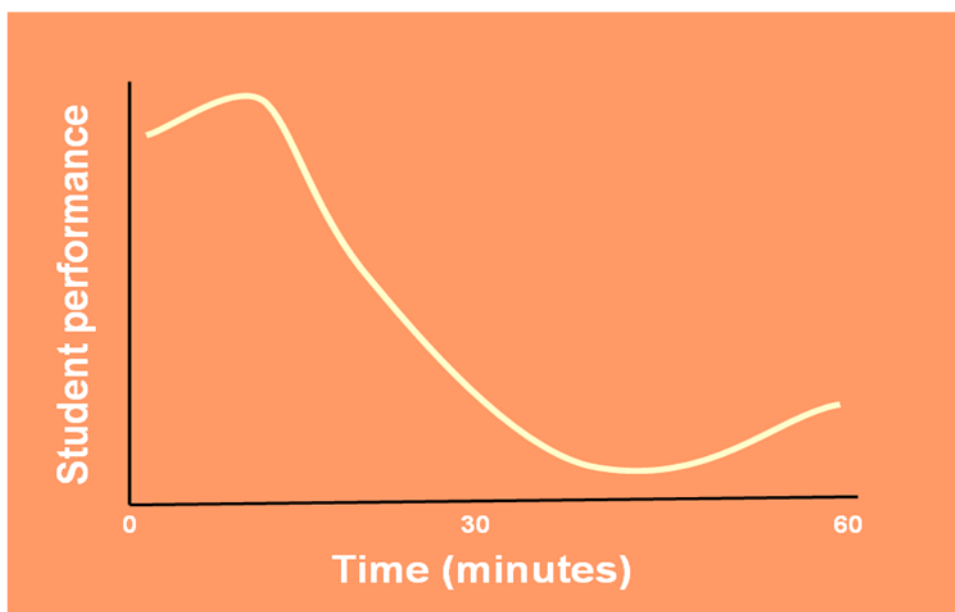


Figure 1. *Student performance and attention fluctuations*. Adapted from Gibbs and Habbshaw (1989).

The steepness of the decline in attention and performance is also affected by factors such as time of day, number of students present and room temperature/other environmental factors. This decline in performance is also relevant during inde-

pendent study (e.g. during passive reading) and to lecturers whilst they are giving lectures!

Breaking up the lecture with activities helps to restore learners close to their original level of performance. The following are examples of activities that you may want to consider:

- **Video clips/Podcasts:** with or without activities
- **Buzz groups:** set a specific question or topic for a short exercise in small groups
- **'Pyramid':** work as an individual then in pairs then in fours then report back to the whole class in a plenary session.
- **Individual tasks:** e.g. ask spend 3 minutes revisiting your lecture notes thus far as a silent task
- **Teaching themselves:** provide a page of theory for each group and give them time to prepare a brief teaching session for the other students.
- **Line-ups:** e.g. ask students where they stand on a continuum of an idea?
- **In-class tests** e.g. multiple choice questionnaires, EVS use.
- **Rounds:** ask students to state one thing that they will take away from this session.

It is possible in certain situations to maintain high levels of attention for prolonged periods, for example:

- When the task is very important and relevant e.g. exam preparation.
- When the task is very interesting, novel and has personal relevance.
- When intellectual involvement and challenge is high (although excessive demands can also overburden learners and cause other problems).

**7 Ask for help. Suzanne Fergus.**

*"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work"* ~Thomas Edison

There are occasions when something doesn't work as effectively as planned. This could be perhaps something related to technology, student discipline, student performance issues or student feedback.

It could also be that you recognise a need to do things differently in your own practice. The Learning and Teaching Institute at the University of Hertfordshire therefore offers a number of workshops and seminars throughout the year for continuing professional development. These workshops are aimed to help staff develop skills and knowledge to enable them to enhance the student learning experience.

Some examples of workshops are listed here:

- Refreshing your practice
- Using Adobe Connect as a virtual classroom
- Developing screen capture and narrated presentations to enhance teaching.
- Getting started in using Electronic Voting Systems in teaching
- Podcasting and editing using Audacity
- Reducing the degree attainment gap between White and Black, Minority, Ethnic students: what can you do?
- Using curriculum design toolkits
- Using Video within teaching
- In and out of class assessment
- Providing support for students with deferrals/referrals
- Feedback and marking
- Developing Multiple Choice Questionnaires (MCQs).

**6 Escape from the front! Phil Porter.**

If the design of the lecture theatre will allow it, using a wireless presentation 'clicker' can help you escape from the lectern or console at the front of the room, because you can advance your slides and use the laser pointer installed within the clicker to highlight on-screen objects or text. This can help student engagement because a lecturer moving about the class immediately provides a more dynamic environment and for those students who may be distracted by, for example, their mobile telephones, an approaching lecturer generally helps focus the mind! If you allow laptop use in your lectures it also gives you the opportunity to check that students are genuinely looking at your slides or making notes!

**5. Make use of props. Phil Porter.**

There are many reasons why the Royal Institution Christmas lectures are so absorbing and engaging. However, one of the elements that helps engage the audience in these lectures is the regular use of props. This is a perennial element of the Christmas lectures that helps to maintain audience interest and when the audience physically engage with the props (e.g. a volunteer comes from the audience or the object is passed round the audience) engagement becomes even more obvious. Showing your students what something looks like and/or feels like is a powerful way of generating interest and helping students remember the topic under discussion.



**4. Check understanding. Suzanne Fergus.**

Could this be your lecture?



In a teaching session how do you know what the students are thinking? If you ask the question “does everyone understand?”, are you really likely to receive a response and, even if you do, can you accurately assess the level of student understanding?

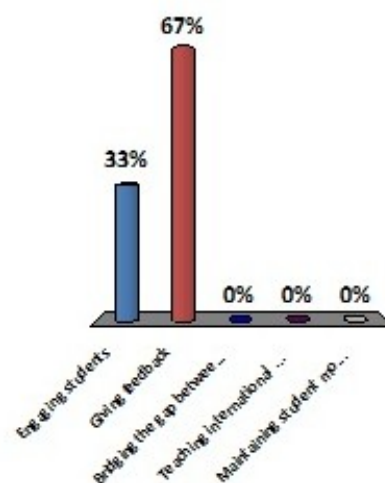
One approach to check understanding and to help engage students is to use Electronic Voting System (EVS).

Some of the benefits of EVS include

- ✓ Encourages greater engagement in module and a better level of attendance
- ✓ Allows students who may not have confidence to speak to express their understanding
- ✓ Reinforces active learning throughout the year
- ✓ Provides ongoing feedback on personal understanding throughout the year
- ✓ Enables individual members of an audience to respond to questions, not just those who have the confidence to do so
- ✓ Enables answers to be collated, saved and processed for assessment purposes.

### Which of these do you find most challenging in a class?

1. Engaging students
2. Giving feedback
3. Bridging the gap between teaching and learning
4. Teaching international students
5. Maintaining student motivation





The figure above shows the nature of the answers displayed when using EVS, which is visible after a question has been answered by the students.

EVS can be used in a variety of ways, such as regular question and answer sessions during the lecture in order to keep track of understanding and engage the whole class. Seeking opinions e.g. ethical issues is another useful approach. Diagnostic tests and a record of attendance are other uses of EVS.



### **3. Engage with research. Phil Porter.**

Engaging students with research can inspire and enthuse and any university student has a right to expect their curriculum to be informed by current research and scholarship in their chosen discipline. If you are research active then try to engage and involve your students with your research; I have seen many students flourish and attain great things through engagement with staff research. If you are not research active you still have great opportunities to enthuse your students by the research of others and to foster an environment where enquiry and research are promoted and valued. The University of Hertfordshire Learning and Teaching Institute has created a series of curriculum design toolkits to assist staff in addressing key agendas in Higher Education and there is a [toolkit](#) specifically aimed at research-informed teaching that may serve as a useful starting point to assist you in furthering your engagement of students with research.



### **2. Visualise. Phil Porter.**

This tip relates to tips 1 and 2. There is no doubt that visual elements in any presentation can assist with audience engagement. It could be as simple as a photograph or diagram, or an animation, or an embedded movie clip or indeed a DVD or video played as part of the session. Whatever the method, there is no doubt that for most of us, we remember what we see much more readily than what we read or hear. Visual elements in a teaching session can also help us to explain complex concepts to our students and are particularly important if we are discussing environments or issues where the students have no prior experience or knowledge; a visual element in the teaching session to help students conceptualise can be a real help. Don't forget that most teaching rooms now have electronic

visualisers and so you can also use these to show students paper based text or objects and props. I have even seen a visualiser effectively used to show students an application working on an iphone!

**1. Start and finish with a bang!**



A lecture is a performance and like every memorable performance it needs to start and end with a bang! Think about it, would a rock band start a concert with a ballad? Unlikely! Would a magician finish a stage performance with a close-up card trick? I doubt it! Starting and ending your lecture with something captivating helps to make the lecture more memorable for students and helps them engage with the subject matter. It could be as simple as an interesting background image on your opening slide which is on display as students take their seats such as the example below, it could be a 'volunteer from the audience' style exercise at the end.



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Why the picture of Freddie Mercury? Well for a lesson in starting and ending with a bang and keeping an audience captivated [watch this up to 21:18!](#)