

A Few Suggestions on How to Make Lectures More Fun

Sitting through 80 minute lectures several times a day can be tiring for a student. Sometimes learning can be assisted by teachers making those lectures a bit more fun. Below are a few suggestions.

But first, remember:

1. There will be awkward moments, things don't always work as planned, but it is worth the try.
2. Try to turn an awkward moment around by not being embarrassed by it:
In a bad joke: "Good thing I am not in show business" In an error: "I don't have to know how to program, I am only teaching it" And the all time best defense: Be the first one to make fun about yourself
"Actually, I am the: worst programmer, least efficient, worse organized, least creative, most boring, most annoying, most neurotic....."
Feel free to exaggerate.

Suggestions on making lectures fun:

- General Tip: the goal is not to make them laugh, but to break the monotony the fact that you are making an effort is always appreciated
 - Start class with a two-minute fun activity: read a story from a newspaper, comment on news, on last night's game, talk about a restaurant in Riverside or a fun activity in Riverside, show a short video.
 - * Consider starting with the Lame Joke of the Week: read aloud from a book, choose lame jokes (or not), and tell students that your goal is to find the lamest joke of all, and measure their boos as a sign of lameness.
 - * If you use a laptop: start with a cartoon, or a cool picture and talk about it (or not), show something you are passionate about
 - Do something goofy: wear a funny hat, bring a teddy bear and introduce him in the class and say its name will be in the quiz
 - Break the monotony: set your watch, and take a 1' break in the middle, and stop whatever you do, sit down, change tone, and ask them something or go at the back of the room and sit next to a student and chat
 - * Make this a habit, something that students will anticipate
 - Do random selection of student, and give them something (chocolate bar) or have them introduce themselves to you or to the class, or say what they hate most about the class so far
 - Use quotes from books or movies or songs, that you think they will like or that simply you like
 - Take polls on various related or not things (usually that they care or can relate about)
 - * It shows you care about their opinion
 - * It breaks the monotony
- Ex. what is cool: faded jeans, pink hair
what music is in, most popular song of the week (have two songs handy)
best movie of the week

are movies better than the book version or not?
how many emails do they get per day: <30 , $30 < x < 100$, $100 <$
what topic in the class has been most interesting, least interesting
how many hours a week do they play video games

- Look for opportunities to use demonstrations that make a point
Ex. teach that skills require practice -- throw a football across the room, explain that throwing doesn't come from equations. At same time, launching a rocket to the moon requires equations. Need both.
- Have contests, give out prizes.
Ex. Have students write program to calculate cost/in² of pizza. Include extra credit to find best pizza deal -- winner gets a small prize (candy bar, tiny toy from kids meal, whatever).
Ex. Give prize to whoever finds best solution to an optimization problem, or to whoever wrote the neatest cost, etc.
- For smaller classes, break class into groups, have them get to know one another, and then have them work on problems together and present their solutions to the class
- Occasionally use a game-show format (like Jeopardy) to introduce material or to review material.

Establishing a Relationship

The idea: students should not feel that you are against them.

- Tell them what you want them to believe about you and the class over and over and over:
 - * I love you guys
 - * I love teaching
 - * I want all of you to get As.
 - * Help me to help you. (get better grades, learn better, be interactive)
 - * Learning is more fun than work (except for the money)
- Tell them little things about yourself (avoid long and winding stories though) so that they will see you are human and you trust them enough to share
 - * home country: where, what, how
 - * your experience with learning the stuff you teach
 - * worst class ever, best class ever, worst teacher, worst exam etc
- Acknowledge the difficulty they are facing:
 - * "This is tricky"
 - * "Networks are hard"
 - * "Debugging sucks"
- Acknowledge the fact that learning is hard work
 - * "I know you 'd rather go out and party, but trust me this is important to learn..."
 - * "I know this is tricky, but try..."
 - * "Programming can be frustrating, but you have to do it"
- Praise them: collectively, in general: show that you believe in them
 - * young generations are better
 - * you will probably learn more than I ever learned
 - * you have the potential, you can do great things in your life, if you want to
 - * to be here, you are already a special person
 - * Repeat all the time: "You are clever people, you know what you have to do" (even after you just finished giving them advice that they desperately needed)
- Regarding grading and hard work:

- * You feel for them, but it has to be done
- * "Trust me, I don't enjoy marking, or putting together tests
It's my job though."
- * I have to be fair in grading.

- Bring cookies, or candy: the edible sign that you care!!!
- Set the tone on the very first day -- pull everything out of your bag of tricks. They'll know off the bat that you realize lectures can be boring and you want to change that -- that you understand their perspective.

Misc Tips

- Make sure they can hear you: loud, slow
(we all get excited and start slurring and hurrying)
- Randomly stop and get a nod: or just give them a chance to think
- Pause time is not bad or embarrassing: you don't have to fill every second
thinking or mental breaks are good
- Try to smile: if you smile, you force yourself to switch moods
(I am often in a good mood, but come across as stern)
- Try to look at them and establish eye contact
- Move around, walk, go at the back of the room, even while you are speaking
- Sit down next to them, talk to the person next to you
- If possible, big if, try to learn their names. At least ask them their names,
even if you forget, "Nice meeting you Mary"
- Try to visualize teaching as a conversation: use your conversation voice and
mannerisms
- Don't just show them how to do things -- give them a problem in class,
and then tell them to solve it. Wait a couple minutes, and THEN show them
the solution. This keeps them involved, and helps them learn by doing,
with quick feedback when they see your solution.