

First Year Teaching – A Humorous Perspective

STATUTORY WARNING: This post contains nothing useful. If you are looking for intellectual stimulation which is instructive and inspirational, please click somewhere else!

Strange but true! In about thirty years of teaching all over the world, I had never actually taught a first-year course. In my early days at IIT/K, the senior professors in the department would always volunteer to teach the large classes so as not to overload the “freshers” like us. Later, I would still find the task of teaching large classes daunting and was quite happy to stay within my comfort zone and teach my usual clutch of senior UG or PG courses, leaving the large first and second year courses for my braver colleagues in the department. I did teach a couple of large classes in Singapore but these were mostly third-year students who had become quite worldly-wise after two years of college – but more on that later!

Even the first day of lectures was full of surprises! When I walked into my first lecture with a room bursting at the seams with fresh-faced kids, I was mildly surprised to see some very mature faces sitting in the last couple of rows. I could not quite figure out how these people could have made it through the JEE age limits but charitably thought that this might be because of the flexible birth certificates that we Indians sometimes manage to get. It took me a while to realize that these “senior students” were not students at all but fond parents sitting in to sample what their little bundles of joy would be going through for the next four years. I have always wondered what they thought of my performance that day – must have been reasonably acceptable as I do not recall seeing angry outbursts on the lecturing quality of IIT professors in newspapers and blogs later. May be they, like their little ones, were in a little bit of a shock at having to let go of each other after so many years – either that, or both sides were quietly planning on how to celebrate their new-found freedom.

I generally do not teach anything in my first lecture – I prefer to spend the first lecture hour gossiping with the students, trying to get to know them better and put them at their ease. This was quite useful as most of them still seemed a little shell-shocked at having actually made it through to one of the IITs after the traumatic experience of preparing for and taking the JEE exam. If they were looking for an awe-inspiring first lecture, they must have been quite disappointed as I was more than happy to spend that first hour talking about life in general and life at IITG, in particular. I guess it takes a little while for them to get training in survival skills from their seniors and learn that the 75% attendance requirement is more a piece of wishful thinking on our part and less a rule that is strictly enforced.

It also took me a while to realize that the hungry look I was seeing in their faces was not really there because they were hungry for knowledge – that they were actually plain hungry as their digestive systems had not yet adjusted to the rigours of mess food after years of pampering by Mom’s culinary skills. That instead of parents cajoling them to eat more, they would now have to survive on whatever food comes their way in industrial style mess cooking. In that first class, they waxed lyrical on what they could not bring themselves to eat at breakfast and what they were not looking forward to eat for their lunch and dinner. Little did they know that they would eventually adjust to mess food anyway and would come to look at dining out at Soiree and Gobindo Dhaba as gourmet expeditions to treasure – that their taste buds would slip into a coma waiting for the day when they could eat properly once again. (Actually, IITG mess food is a notch or two above what we used to get as food in IIT/K hostels during our UG days. Our general view then was that though the food may not actually kill you, it could very well drive you to suicide.)

Teaching in Singapore for six years had been quite a different experience. The class there would sit through lectures impassively with deadpan expressions on their faces regardless of the jokes one would try to make. No one would ask any questions so you could never quite figure out whether what you were teaching was too easy or too difficult. The class would sort of stoically bear through whatever you said and the only sound you could hear (apart from your own voice) was the mild snoring from the rear of the class and the rustle of pages from the boy intently reading the newspaper in the last row. (I bravely accosted the newspaper reader once and asked why he was reading a newspaper in class. His response to this was an all time classic - “Class! What class!” – it turned out that he was just relaxing there because the room was air-conditioned and he did not have even the remotest interest in computer networks!). Then there was the guy who came to class (and sat in the front row) with a video camera in hand and recorded the whole lecture – being recorded for posterity may

sound nice but it is actually quite unnerving. The first thing that happens is that one develops a fatal fascination for the camera and it becomes very hard to look anywhere else. Then, after the class you would worry whether you made a mistake anywhere or whether some of your comments were a little too racy or slightly off colour. Somehow, it was very hard to concentrate on the lecture with that video camera staring at you for the entire hour!

Have you ever made a joke at which no one laughed, where no one even gave a wan, tired looking smile? Believe me, it is a thoroughly unnerving experience which is made worse by the fact that you then have to tell the class that that was meant to be just a joke and was not something that they had to study for the exams! My daughter (always my sternest critic) would insist that my jokes are really bad ones and that she could sympathize with my class for being made to have to listen to them. She may well be right, but that still does not explain why I could go through lecture after lecture without any response or questions from the class. It was my firm belief that even if I did a tango in class in Singapore wearing a fedora and boxer shorts, I would still not get any response from the students. I was never brave enough to try that as I did not quite fancy being called upon by the Dean to explain my deviant classroom techniques – on the other hand, who knows, he might have even asked me for a tip or two on my dancing exposition before handing me over to the white-coated guys from the mental asylum.

The first year class in IITG was very responsive, sometimes boisterously so! As I proudly reported to my daughter, not only did they ask questions in class (some very good ones. sometimes) they also dutifully laughed at all my jokes. (They probably deserve good grades just for that! God bless them!) My problem here was something quite different and had to do with the fact that every lecture had to be delivered twice as IITG does not have the infrastructure to accommodate 600+ students in a single classroom. This meant that the morning class always got to hear the better jokes as somehow I felt slightly foolish repeating the morning's jokes in the afternoon lecture and had to try different ones in the afternoon. I am no comedian and the pressure of keeping two different sets of jokes ready for two classes on the same day became quite stressful at times.

The actual teaching of the course was surprisingly easy. To a great extent, I was lucky to inherit excellent lecture notes from my predecessors (Prof. Ratnajit and Prof. Chitrlekha) which I used generously. I also benefited from what I had learnt from my own teachers (Profs. R.N. Biswas, Raghubir Sharan and T.R. Vishwanathan), way back in the dim past of my own undergraduate days. Having a great co-instructor (Prof. Praveen Kumar) and a very efficient Course Coordinator (Prof. P. R. Sahu) helped a lot as they made things a lot easier. We also benefited from a very good team of tutors, even though they had to be occasionally cajoled and harassed to mark the exams and quizzes quickly. If you are planning to teach a first-year course, here is a gem of wisdom from the wise – make sure you get a good team - that way half the battle is already won even before you actually start teaching!

I guess this one has become too long – might as well save the rest of my thoughts for another post some other day! Your comments and stories about your own experience of teaching first year courses would be very welcome!

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