When You are a Guest Lecturer

This article appeared in Teaching and Learning Exchange, 12, no. 2 (winter 2005): 9. It is edited and used here with permission from David Cook and University Teaching Services at the University of Alberta.

At some point in your career you will likely be asked to be a guest lecturer for someone else’s class. Whether you are one of several presenters in a “parade of stars” or you are “parachuted in” as a subject expert for several lectures, this distinctive opportunity provides a chance to make a difference in the lives of students. David Cook (University of Alberta, professor of pharmacology) insists that just one bright light can change a student’s feelings concerning a subject, sparking new attitudes about a discipline. That bright light can be YOU, the guest lecturer!

Of course the class is not yours. You have no control over curriculum, course structure, or assessment. Nevertheless, some aspects of being a guest lecturer can work in your favor. For example, it is easier to be brilliant in one or two lectures than in an entire semester, and if you do well, it will enhance your reputation as a memorable teacher. Furthermore, as a guest lecturer you probably won’t be required to do follow-ups, making your job easier.

Cook reminds instructors that their guest lecture is part of a whole course. Successful guest lecturers provide students with a context for their presentations. Limit the content and organize it in a way that highlights the place of your material in the continuum of the course.

Providing a context for your guest lecture increases the odds that students will engage in, and retain, their learning. In order to do this, obtain the course syllabus and consider observing the class before your scheduled debut. Ensure that your presentation fits with what has come before and what will come after.

A guest lecturer is often asked to expound on a topic in one or two lectures that could easily span a semester-long course. To prevent information overload, limit the content and emphasize the key points, which will increase the likelihood that students will remember the most important concepts. Cook counsels, “Do less, but more in-depth.” Careful preparation is essential. Effective organization enhances retention. If you categorize information in logical groups of no more than six, you can help students retain information in a useful form.

If you are one in a series of guest lecturers, find out who went before and what was taught. Be prepared to deal with negativity if the previous speaker was poor, or be aware that you might be compared unfavorably if the previous speaker was brilliant.

Introduce yourself to the students and be sure to give them your contact information. Be enthusiastic and engage their enthusiasm during the presentation. Close to the end of your time period, summarize the key points of the lecture, placing them within context of the course. Finally, link your lecture to the next one, even if it will be presented by another guest speaker rather than you.

Cook claims that ten minutes is enough time to fall in love or to be converted to a new religion; it is also time enough for a guest lecturer to kindle students’ enlightenment with new perspectives.

Reprinted here with permission from Lynn Sorenson, editor, “Focus on Faculty, Brigham Young University; Provo, Utah