

Surprise, surprise! (Re-)grabbing the attention of students in the university classroom through creative touches

Introduction and background

There is a considerable body of evidence pointing to the fact that students struggle to remain engaged in their classes – academic boredom is a real issue. In this opinion piece, Dr Simon Brownhill from the University of Bristol School of Education argues that lecturers can effectively grab or re-grab the attention of their students by introducing an element of surprise. The piece looks at the theory which underpins a ‘surprise’ approach and goes on to provide practical examples.

Key findings

Surprise: definitions and role

- Researchers agree that defining ‘surprise’ is not a simple matter and that no universal consensus has yet been reached.
- Surprise has been defined in terms of a basic emotional response, something which is directly related to expectation, an automatic reaction to a mismatch, and something which stems from an event which is difficult to explain.
- For the purposes of the opinion piece, the author adopts the following definition provided by the American Psychological Society (2018)¹: ‘an emotion typically resulting from (...) the detection of novelty in the environment’. From a professional perspective, he coins a personal definition of surprise as ‘something that is perceived as being unusual or unexpected; something that is (momentarily) attention-grabbing; something that yields a response, be it mental or physical’.
- Theorists have previously recognised the central role which surprise can play in education. For example, Buber (2002, p.241)² asserts that a ‘real lesson’ should be ‘neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises’. Similarly, Stern (2013, p.45)³, speaking within a school context, argues that ‘planning is necessary (yet) surprises are inevitable and it is the presence of surprise which makes a school educational’.
- The author believes that the principle of surprise is equally relevant to the Higher Education context. This is highlighted by Manuello (2020)⁴ who says that: ‘Surprise upends what learners believe and helps them to make discoveries, giving strong opportunities for independent learning. Socrates and Aristotle thought that “surprise combined with astonishment is the beginning of knowledge”. This effect brings about questioning and reappraisal, both things which give fresh momentum to curiosity and therefore learner

engagement. It will also enable greater memorisation – faced with the surprise effect, learners will have to use all their senses and all their concentration to analyse the surprise component’.

- Similarly, Adler (2008, p.147)⁵ argues that surprise is of ‘great value for learning’.

Academic boredom

- The author claims that there are students in every university classroom across the globe who are academically bored. Academic boredom should be of concern to higher education lecturers, as it has a negative impact on both motivation and achievement. He challenges his readers to evaluate how many indications of boredom they have recently seen in their university classrooms. An indicative list, based on the work of Sharp and Hemmings (2016)⁶ is provided by the author and its elements are listed below.
 - Drowsiness and yawning (face looks sleepy, lethargic body language, silent or loud yawns).
 - Head in hands (palms/fingers cover some or all facial features).
 - Slouching (standing, moving, or sitting in a rather lazy, drooping way).
 - Avoidance of eye contact with the lecturer and/or peers.
 - Vacant stares (indicating that the individual is not thinking about anything in particular).
 - Repeated finger or foot tapping (may be fidgeting in seat or making noise with a pen/pencil).
 - Mobile phone or laptop distractions (taking selfies, surfing the Internet, engaging with social media, answering emails/texts).

¹ American Psychological Society (2018). *Surprise*. In APA Dictionary of Psychology. Retrieved March 4, 2024 from <https://dictionary.apa.org/surprise>

² Buber, M. (2002). *Between Man and Man* (R. Gregory-Smith, Trans.) (2nd edn). London: Routledge.

³ Stern, J. (2013). Surprise in Schools: Martin Buber and dialogic schooling. *Forum*, 55(1), 45-58. <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-55-issue-1/article-5349/>

⁴ Manuello, J. (2020, December 10). Creating surprise to boost learning.

Teach on Mars.

<https://www.teachonmars.com/en/blog/2020/12/creating-surprise-boost-learning/>

⁵ Adler, J. E. (2008). Surprise. *Educational Theory*, 58(2), 149-173. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00282.x>

⁶ Sharp, J., & Hemmings, B. (2016). I'm bored, get me out of here. *University and College Counselling*, 4(1), March. <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/university-and-college-counselling/march-2016/im-bored-get-me-out-of-here/>

- Task avoidance (not participating in class discussion, completing assignments, or undertaking the required reading).
- Persistent clock watching (looking at wrist watch or checking time on phone).

Grabbing the attention of students through creative touches

- Drawing on his former research into the use of creative touches in student assessment, the author argues that the inclusion of creative touches as part of a lecturer's wider practice is an effective way of stimulating surprise for students in the university classroom.
- Creative touches may come in the form of alterations and additions. Additions refer to the inclusion of new and innovative ideas which complement and enhance the taught delivery in the classroom. Alterations are 'tweaks' which are made by lecturers to their instructional materials.

Examples of creative touches (additions and alterations)

- One addition mentioned by the author involves projecting a PowerPoint presentation onto the ceiling to force students to attend part of the class by lying on rugs on the floor or hiding questions for a review activity under desks.
- Another cited example of an addition was that of a guest speaker bringing a gift bag and setting it in front of the class, without saying anything about it. Students' curiosity was engaged as they wondered what was inside the bag.
- A further addition is the use of music which Dabell (2017)⁷ says can 'help enhance a taught lesson because it possesses neural firepower and it has a powerful effect on learning. ... You could play music when (students) come into the classroom, or at key points in a (taught session) to change direction'.
- The author gives several examples of alterations. One example involves presenting quoted text to students using speech bubbles, along with an audio recording of the text and an image of the associated theorist, animating this using free online photo animation apps.
- Another alteration involves altering materials by: using reduced text slides by offering a key word or a short phrase; mixing up background colours or using text which differs in size, colour, and font within and between slides; and using animated text with entrance, emphasis, exit, and motion effects.
- In addition to visual alterations, the author suggests using alterations which promote interaction with the instructional materials:
 - Firstly, rather than presenting the learning objectives at the start of a taught lesson, students could be presented with a blank titled slide, and invited to predict what they think the learning objectives might be, based on their prior scanning of the instructional materials.
 - Another suggestion is to offer students individual slides with missing words withdemarked spaces....., rectangular boxes, or lines which signal that students need to be on the lookout for key text which

they need to add to their version to make it complete.

- Finally, the author suggests surprising students with a series of statements on a slide with which they have to interact physically or digitally, e.g., rank order them by number, establish which of the statements are true or false, highlight which is personally perceived to be the most important statement, or connect them with a line to an associated author's surname/year citation.
- The author points out that creative touches can also be brought to other aspects of the lecturer's practice. For example, lecturers can surprise students through seating (unusual arrangements of moveable tables and chairs), giving students purposeful opportunities to explore body percussion, engage in paper folding, or animate sock puppets.
- In terms of assessment, the author suggests surprising students with innovative strategies to review classroom learning such as *Loop dominoes* and *Sewing cards*.

Conclusion

- Although the author strongly advocates for elements of surprise in this piece, he concludes with a few important caveats:
 - Not all students will like the surprises which they might encounter in the university classroom – these could induce anxiety for some students (and lecturers).
 - There is no assurance that the surprises which lecturers integrate into their practice will always succeed in (re-)grabbing the attention of students.
- However, readers are still encouraged to embrace an enthusiastic attitude towards surprise, recognising that its impact on students can only be known if lecturers creatively experiment with it as part of their future practice.

⁷ Dabell, J. (2017, November 1). Supply teaching: The element of surprise. *SecEd*. <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/best-practice/supply-teaching-the-element-of-surprise/>

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