

## Approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn

Simon Angus

**Citation:** *For developing and implementing online and in-classroom technologies that motivate, inspire and engage students to take the next step beyond the classroom.*

**Synopsis:** *Simon Angus is a passionate educator who has sought to transfer his passion for learning to his students by embracing new technologies inside and outside the classroom, and by increasing opportunities for students to engage with each other and the world. Simon uses technology wherever it serves to enhance the learning experience. Two examples of this include his pioneering pilot program in Tablet PC teaching in the Department of Economics, and the establishment of the EconomicsNow! website. These and other innovations have been recognised with Department and Faculty awards, and most importantly, Simon's many enthusiastic students.*

### Philosophy of Practice

*Outstanding - without doubt one of, if not the single best, lecturer I have come across in my 4 years at Monash.*

Student, ECC2800, S1 2009, anonymous survey

*A brilliant job by an enthusiastic teacher who obviously loves his work! Thanks for the best unit I've yet taken at Uni Simon!*

Student, ECC2800, S1 2009, anonymous survey

My philosophy of teaching is driven by my passion for learning on the one hand, and my acute sense of responsibility towards my students on the other.

*I found myself wanting to know more and looking forward to coming to class. His enthusiasm is infectious, even when teaching mundane topics like how to write a good academic essay, the material was presented in such a way that we were all eager to learn. Similarly, while I have had other lecturers that have taken a month to explain the Solow model, Simon explained it in such a way that the class had a real understanding in one lecture. It is clear that he puts a great deal of thought, time and energy into being a great lecturer and really cares about his students' learning.*

Student, ECC2800, S1 2010

*Best lecturer I've had since I started University in 2006. That's a big call, but you won by a million miles!!! Podcasts were fantastic resource, information was stimulating, flowed logically. I like your way of thinking ... I couldn't design, think of a better course structure myself. I can tell you have had an engineering/science background, as your sense of clarity is remarkable.*

Student, ECC2800, S1 2010

The former is driven, on reflection, by the teachers who have inspired me in my varied learning endeavours, not least of which I would count my own father's infectious dinner table expositions. It was clear to me from a very young age that learning that is fun, meaningful and exciting is learning that lasts. I see it as my role to teach that which fits these attributes. If the material is not something I believe to be valuable, or I do not present it in a way that reveals the paradoxes, enigmas, tensions and thrills of the intellectual chase, then I have not rendered it in its fullest sense to my students, and I have missed a great opportunity.

Which leads me to my sense of responsibility. I make it a rule to share with my students how fortunate they are to sit in the very seats that they do. This blessing is not due to my lecturing or the particular unit on offer, rather, some simple maths brings home the message that to study for a tertiary degree, in a developed country of the world, puts the student in a very select group of humanity: for every three of them sitting in the theatre, there are 97 potential students around the world who will not enjoy their opportunity. Now consider that for each lecture hall of 100 such privileged students, there is but a single lecturer. Now my sense of responsibility is easily appreciated.

Below, I have selected three approaches to my teaching that aim to influence, motivate and inspire students to learn.

## Motivating Young Minds Beyond the Classroom

*Simon Angus obviously makes a lot of effort in preparing this unit, and it definitely shows. This subject has helped to further deepen my understanding of economics and I'm very grateful for it. I have no criticisms really. It has also helped in my decision to choose economics as my major.*

Student, ECC2810, S1 2008

*This class has changed my attitude towards aid and has also potentially changed my future career path. Favourite class in all 4 years at Monash.*

Student, ECC2800, S1 2009

*Thanks Simon for your energy and enthusiasm - you inspire me to be a teacher!*

Student, ECC2810, S1 2008

What are we doing at university, if not equipping and motivating our students for tomorrow's problems? It has been a real joy to see students grappling with the really tough issues of our time: poverty and inequality, climate change and sustainability, the ongoing battle for economic supremacy and the ideas that drive nations. My approach has been to try and lift the material from the page to the world; one example of this is the EconomicsNow! Website.

### Example: Launch of EconomicsNow! Website

*EconomicsNow! is great and I will definitely continue using it after this unit. I hope that it becomes a tool that not only Monash students but students everywhere use to get up to date information on economic issues.*

Student, ECC2800 S1 2009, anonymous survey

*I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the subject over the semester, not just the specific content but the way you were able to redefine for me what economics is all about. It reinvigorated why I was attracted to the discipline in the first place. ... Again thanks very much and I will continue to follow EconomicsNow! and hopefully use my knowledge of economics to make the world a better place.*

Student, ECC2800, by email, 8 June 2009

My reading of the educational literature indicated that students who engage more often with the material of a unit, be it inside or outside of formal teaching times, would have far greater retention and understanding. The idea was then to engage students through their own media – sound and video files – with ideas taken from the unit to the world at large. With the help of a Faculty grant EconomicsNow! (<http://www.econnow.com/>) was born and has received considerable interest from students since. During semester, I would see an article or video of interest online, write a response to it based on Economics taught in ECC2800 and then post the article and a recording on the site. Students subscribed through their iPods and could listen at their leisure. I'm thankful to many economists and scientists who have so far agreed to be interviewed for the project. This has brought prominent growth theorists (e.g. Greg Clark, University of California at Davis), climate policy specialists (e.g. Michael Hanneman, Berkeley) and non-government advocates (e.g. Cobus de Swardt, MD of Transparency International) to the ears and minds of students.

### Innovations for Inspiration

*It felt like the lecturer actually cared about teaching. Very well equipped with technology to enhance lectures like videos and recordings, and Tablet PC etc.*

Student, ECC2800, S1 2010

*Very passionate, well read and clear. Best lecturer I've had in my 3 years at Monash, hard to see where to improve. Particularly noteworthy is his use of his Tablet PC so that he could make diagrams and graphs easily which were displayed on the lectures at home as well.*

Student, ECC2800, S1 2010

Innovations are what keeps us fresh as educators. Be they a new unit, teaching aid in the classroom, online technology or way of arranging the chairs, active reflection and observation of the student experience prompts many ideas for improving the learning experience. Of course, the teaching literature also provides many examples of pedagogic aids and these must be the basis of our method. However, in my experience, the real excitement for teacher and student alike comes from taking a few risks – trying a technology or way of communicating or method of feedback that is clearly new. With the right

explanation, and trust of the students, I have found the feedback always positive, even when things didn't go as planned, or the innovation was agreed by all to be not worthwhile. Nevertheless, innovations that inspire learning, bring students to the material more often, or in new ways, or promote their own engagement with the material must be unceasingly sought out.

### Example: A Return to Dynamic Teaching with Tablet PCs

*I was really impressed with the tablet, especially for an economics class due to its ability to be able to draw diagrams and display them on the projector screen.*

Student, ECC2800 S1 2009, anonymous survey

*The tablet was really great - 100% must continue its use! Particularly for a subject like this which requires lots of diagrams and graphs and quotes etc. Made lecture interesting, fun and very interactive. It is good when the lecturer can actually 'participate' in the lecturing. It makes the lecture material a lot more accessible than when it is formally typed and clean, without scribbles or diagrams, as it is in other subjects.*

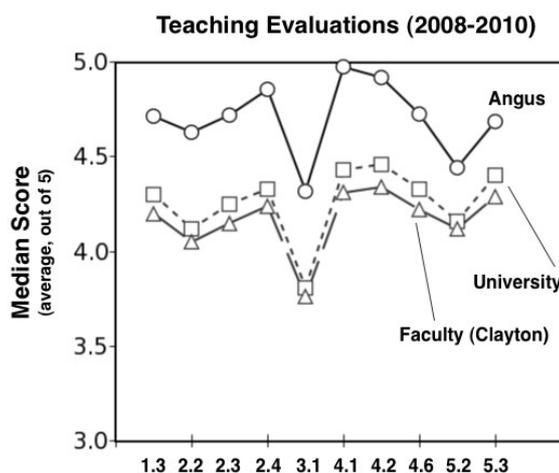
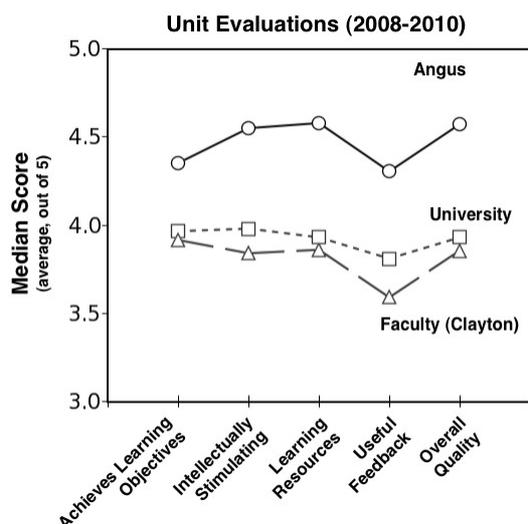
Student, ECC2800 S1 2009, anonymous survey

Frustrated with the ubiquitous and deleterious impacts of PowerPoint's rigid techniques, I sought alternatives. In late 2008 I attended an e-Learning seminar at Monash and saw the new Tablet PC technology demonstrated. Here was the return to dynamism so sorely needed – the ability to draw, annotate, scribble and create in real-time, digitally, and with simple and effective tools. I wrote quickly to my Head of Department and received pilot funding to trial a Tablet PC in my classes in S1 2009. The response was overwhelming from students.

*Online Anonymous Survey Feedback:* The Tablet was introduced in my classes in week four and so this allowed for 'natural experiment' approach to surveying students at the end of the session. Of 38 students who replied (60%), 87% Strongly Agreed or Agreed that all things equal, the classes using the Tablet PC were preferable to those without; moreover, 82% of students positively responded to the Tablets being used in other Economics units. In response to this, Economics has rolled out the trial to a further 12 members of faculty, many of whom attended a training session I ran early in Semester 2.

### Quantitative Survey Summary

I include here a summary of my mean Median responses to the Unit and Teaching survey evaluations administered over three years (2008–2010), covering the responses of some 183 and 128 students respectively. I include the 'recommended items' in the Teaching evaluations for comparison. My scores in teaching are largely above the 80<sup>th</sup> (faculty) percentile with three above the 90<sup>th</sup>.



### Peer Recognition

Finally, I note that along with leading the Tablet PC roll-out in the Department of Economics, I have sought to improve the teaching of my colleagues in other ways. These include being invited to present in the 'Teaching Large Classes' seminar (2009), the Tablet PC forum (2010), and recently, being asked to chair an Innovation and Quality in Education Group in the Department of Economics. I was also an awardee of a Dean's Award for Excellence in Teaching (2009).