

Dynamism and Humor in Statistical Presentation: Fresh not Frozen

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The primary goal of any successful education initiative must be the transmission of knowledge to the student. With this in mind, it is imperative to understand the platform that best characterizes the knowledge base of the student body. Educators often focus on extensive journal study to learn new methods of instruction when the answer is as near as the front row of students in the classroom. To achieve our goals, two important steps must be accomplished: breaking down student resistance to the material and then the actual explanation. I propose that the defenses the students erect in statistics class are actually the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy that has permeated the mathematically oriented fields. In my experience, many professors begin difficult topics with a standard disclaimer: “Now I know you don’t want to do this, but we have to because it will arise on the test.” Instead of promulgating a negative attitude towards the material, we as teachers must present the concepts in a positive light. Whenever one tries to explain a foreign concept, a common technique is the use of metaphor. I prefer to use this technique by relating statistical concepts to real world ideas that are familiar to the students. Also, an aspect of humor within the construct of the presentation goes far in the breakdown of a resistant attitude toward the subject.

What do I mean by presenting the concepts through familiar examples? Most examples provided in textbooks follow a standard formula of ‘real world example’. Unfortunately, most students in the class will never be posed a question concerning the weights of African Elephants on the plains of Nigeria so they tend to devalue the details. Sure it may be real data, but how does this affect me here and now? What is its personal relevancy? While it is important to provide practice situations to the students, the instructor (if he/she has formed a rapport with his/her students) is in the prime position to produce questions that may be of interest to the students.

How can you incorporate these practices? Take an active interest in your students. This can be accomplished by simply learning their names as well as what is happening on the university or world stage. By incorporating current events into your presentation, the students will grasp and remember the concepts more often than not because it is presented in a framework to which they can relate. Sports are an excellent way to garner new found interest in your lecture. Representing a school with a nationally recognized football team (as well as being an avid fan myself); I find the students are apt to pay close attention to a football related example because it is something they enjoy. It also provides an easy outlet for a little humor at a rival school or player. I also find it useful to incorporate a little flair of humor to keep the students focused on task. For example, when presenting an example about El Niño (weather phenomenon), I prefaced it with a brief showing of Chris Farley’s SNL skit about El Niño. The students’ defenses retracted instantly with the laughter and they proceeded to take the example to heart. Overall, while the curricula dictate the material, allowing the students interests to determine the method of conveyance is the best way to keep the material fresh, not frozen.