

Word perfect.

Students never cease to surprise me. You'd think that after quarter of a century on faculty, I would have become good at predicting their ways but no: there is always something new.

As a farmer has a time to plant and a time to harvest, so do university teachers. We may call our harvesting 'exam marking' but for us, too, there is some truth in the old proverb 'as ye sow, so shall ye reap'. This year, it was a truth more literal than I had expected.

The various problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that all of our lectures were on-line, and the implications of the Equality Act on digital media compelled us to make closed captions available for anyone who might have a hearing impediment (even if nobody in the class declared one). But the material delivered was exactly the same, and the question-and-answer discussions in live online sessions were broadly the same as used to take place face-to-face, so I was not expecting to be seeing anything different when the exam marking season came upon us.

All of our junior honours exam marking is moderated: that is, once the primary marker has marked a question, a second individual checks that the marking is appropriate and, if there is a disagreement (which happens about 10% of the time), the two have a discussion about what was particularly good, or bad, that one marker saw and the other may have missed. If they still cannot see eye-to-eye (about 2% of cases), a third person takes a look.

My colleague Val Wilson, a developmental biologist of high repute and a very able teacher, happened to be moderating one of my questions, and found a remark in my feedback that I was ignoring the style of English, though through gritted teeth, when I read phrases like “cells that go running around the body getting up to all kinds of stuff” in a formal examination answer. Amused, Val immediately recognized the likely source of that sentence, looked up the relevant lecture, and pointed out that this was an exact quote from one of my lectures!

It was indeed but, of course when I speak like that, there is a reason. Every so often, especially when things are getting complicated, I want to give a very broad-brush, informal overview before diving back down into experimental detail. To indicate clearly that I *am* giving an informal overview (not based on precise data), I switch to informal language. So I did indeed start with the

scene-setting reminder “As you will remember, the neural crest is a population derived from the dorsal neural tube, and consists of cells that go running around the body getting up to all kinds of stuff.... Now, let's follow one type, the type that will become a pigment cell of the skin, and ask how it finds its route and how it knows where and when to mature...” and, from this point, the language became more scholarly and it connected with precise experimental results. Feedback from students has indicated that they appreciate this alternation between informal big-picture-giving, and formal precision where I present real data. It had never occurred to me that there would be people in the class who did not pick up the huge change in style. I now realize I need to flag it in some additional way, for people new enough to English that they cannot feel the stylistic difference between “get up to all kinds of stuff” and “perform a variety of physiological functions”, and therefore cannot feel the difference between 'this is informal orientation' and 'these are real data'.

But the real surprise was that my exact words were coming back in this way. Val and I looked further, and realized that some of our students had been learning the captions/ transcripts of our lectures word-for-word. This was never what was intended. Learning lecturers' words verbatim is a massive waste of time, because we want students to focus on the experiment being described, not the words used to describe it. Of course, none of our questions translate as 'tell us exactly what we told you' – they all require the application of the knowledge gained. So people who just quoted could also be spotted by their low marks, as following our quotes kept taking them off the point of the question, because that exact question would not have been the topic of that part of one lecture.

It never occurred to me that any undergraduate could get to 3rd year and think that learning meant rote learning a lecturer's words. But clearly some do! The overall message is clear – we need to spell out, very early in the first year, what lectures are and what learning is, and the critical difference between rote learning and understanding. That's the thing about universities, even for staff – there is always something new to learn and, in our case, the students are so often our teachers.

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East Lothian, June 2021