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Peer teaching evaluation – Ankur Desai – AOS 171

On September 23, 2010, I attended Assistant Professor Ankur Desai's course, *Global Change: Atmospheric Issues and Problems* (AOS 171). This course is designed for non-majors, and it satisfies both physical science breadth and Communications-B (writing) requirements. In addition, it addresses a scientific issue of high current social, political, and economic relevance. This semester marks the fourth time Ankur has taught the course. Attendance was 30+ students on the day that I observed the course.

I reviewed his course syllabus and found it quite detailed and informative – somewhat more so than my own, in fact. The learning objectives of the course are both well chosen and clearly stated.

Ankur began the lecture with photographs from a very recent severe weather event and gave a brief overview of the event. The apparent goal was to keep the students engaged and to remind them of the connections between the theoretical material of the course and the real world.

He followed with a series of brief announcements, including reminders of the readings to be covered and how to find the lecture notes online via learn@uw. This was followed by a discussion of the first writing assignment that had already been turned in and graded. He devoted a few minutes to reviewing his standards for the citation of references and suggestions for improving papers. He also presented a bar chart showing how the assignment grades were distributed for the class. I felt that this was a good way to put the students' individual grades into perspective.

Some questions were asked during this phase of the lecture, and Ankur was very responsive, and he did a good job of clarifying his expectations.

To set the stage for resuming his lecture on global climate, he displayed a "quick quiz" consisting of a single multiple choice question and had students use "clickers" to try to answer the question. While I had heard of clickers, I had never seen them in use, and I learned something about the possibilities for using them to keep students thinking and engaged as well as to help introduce new lecture topics.

Ankur's lecture style is what I would call cheery and informal, with humor thrown in when possible. I believe that it is probably a welcome, accessible style from the perspective of a non-science student who is a little intimidated by physical science. For those who are more comfortable with science concepts, his approach might sometimes be perceived as a little too "high school," though I'm admittedly extrapolating here.

Overall, I was very impressed with Ankur's enthusiasm for teaching and for his willingness to take a little extra effort with visual aids and props. It is clear that Ankur puts a high value on making the course interesting and engaging for students while getting across the key ideas. The few constructive suggestions I have mainly fall in the category of "things that will improve with experience." Specifically,

- Ankur frequently went back and forth between using the computer projector and writing on the chalkboard. Occasionally, the board light was left off while he wrote on the board, which made reading difficult. Likewise, the board light occasionally stayed on when he was using the projector, which also made reading difficult.

- Ankur should also make an effort to stand more to one side when writing on the board rather than directly in front of what he's writing. This takes practice but becomes second nature after a while.
- During his actual lecture, which was informal and conversational, I think he probably could have seized more frequent opportunities to interject impromptu thought-provoking questions and to invite someone in the class to respond, even if it means waiting 15 seconds for someone to pipe up. For example, "Who wants to take a stab at saying what geometric area of sunlight is intercepted by the Earth?"
- Occasionally Ankur's speaking volume dropped to the point where he probably could be easily heard only in the front half of the room. However, this was not frequent.
- Finally, Ankur had a tendency discuss a key concept but then to elaborate with slightly technical caveats or details that I would not expect students at that level to fully understand or digest, let alone reproduce on an assignment or exam. For me, knowing the subject matter as I do, it was easy to tell what was "important" and what was merely an aside, but I can imagine that a few students could not, and they probably felt a little confused. I suggest being very explicit about distinguishing between core ideas and "nice to know" kinds of information, so that the students who are less prepared to appreciate the latter will still be able to following the main thread.

Notwithstanding the above issues, which are very minor, I was very impressed with Ankur's clearly evident dedication and ability as a teacher.

Grant W. Petty
Professor