WEAVING MAGIC IN THE CLASS

Professor Vaidy Jayaraman ensures his classes are never boring, courtesy his innovative teaching styles and curriculum

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Vaidy Jayaraman had always wanted to be a medical practitioner or a professor. “I am happy I could do the latter,” he begins as he settles down for a brief chat with ede. He graduated in mathematics from Loyola College, Chennai, in 1985, did his master’s in applied mathematics and computer science from Anna University, Chennai, in 1987, was off to the University of Akron, USA, the same year to pursue a master’s in mathematical sciences and get an MBA as well “on the way” from the same university. From University of Akron, he headed to The Ohio State University, USA, to pursue his PhD in operations and supply chain management. During the course of his PhD, he also obtained another master’s operations research.

In 1997 he had to make a choice between going to IMS-A or leave for the US. Armed with graduate teaching assistantships from multiple universities, he chose to pursue his MS at University of Akron, Ohio. At the same time, he also began his teaching career at Akron, courtesy, a graduate teaching assistantship and was employed in a similar role as well during his PhD stint at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Upon completing his PhD, he began full-time teaching work in 1994 at University of Southern Mississippi, USA, and was stationed there till 1998 from where he moved on to Washington State University, USA, and stayed there until 2001. From 2001, he is teaching at University of Miami, USA, and is also a visiting faculty at Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai, from 2004.

He says that his American education has changed his outlook a great deal. “There were some professors in Loyola College and Goody Engineering who were amazing. But most professors that I ran into in the US challenged the students to think for themselves, critique existing theories and provide innovative solutions to problems. Even today whenever I plan a class, the first thought that occurs to my mind is, ‘How do I get my students excited the way my professors did?’” He muses. He also says that the distinct teaching styles of US faculty help bring out the different perspectives of students.

While Jayaraman finds education much more challenging in the US, it is the students in India who are more respectful to teachers, he observes. “It is more exciting for me to teach the students here – I could relate to them better, this is like a chance for me to give back. Here, there is much more respect for the professors and an individual as such. I expect my students to be early to class. The students here are very motivated to learn.”

Vaidy Jayaraman indicates, “My principal philosophical goal as a teacher is to instill knowledge, enthusiasm and skills that students will need to enter and succeed in the workplace. I teach with a lot of compassion and try to inspire, innovate, improve and implement new ideas and techniques in my teaching. I like to help students get excited about the subject matter at hand, so they are keen to learn, and this can be self-motivated. This goal can be best realised by motivating the process of learning in students and supplying them with the foundation and structures that would make this possible. I strongly believe in giving students’ their ‘money’s worth’. His classes are rigorous, well-designed and customised with how the operations and supply chain activities in a business can be designed and managed to support the overall objective of a business. ‘I work diligently on my teaching, carefully plan my course syllabi and material, and incorporate feedback from students and colleagues to improve course content and delivery,' he adds.

Jayaraman has incorporated some of the elements in teaching found usually in universities abroad and he swears the students are loving it. “You need to give them (the students) a practical perspective. While professors in India are amazing in the classroom, Faculty in the US need to consult with companies, publish works, etc. In classrooms — in short bring something different and exciting to the table. Hence, professors abroad are more likely to be on board with these things since there you have an environment where if you don’t publish, you shall perish,” he says.

Jayaraman attempts to achieve three primary goals in all the courses that he teaches by developing the student’s conceptual ability to flow through complex, technical, moral issues and decision making, develop the student’s comprehension and apply principles and generalisations to new problem areas and environments and integrating with other business disciplines primarily information systems, international business and marketing with a focus on real-world applications.

But don’t think that Jayaraman scorns at traditional level of teaching all the way. “When you teach a subject like operations management, you naturally need to use the board. In operations, we need to measure and quantify everything... what gets measured, gets counted...what gets counted, adds to the company’s bottom line. Even now I ask my students to take a pen and a calculator and figure out things the Mathematically way. Of course, you have the other regular elements like classroom discussions, debates, PPTs, textbooks etc,” he grins.

Jayaraman has always made it a point to know his students by their first name even if it happens to be hundreds of them. “Even in the classroom you will never see me rooted to one place. I walk and dance around and push students to interact with me. I keep telling them, ‘If okay if you don’t have the right answers, it is important to keep the questions coming’,” he says. To make his classes lively, the professor who’s in his mid-40s likes to inject humour and his favourite way of preparing the students for class is to have them listen to music for a few minutes.

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