

# *Surprise, Surprise!* (Re-)Grabbing the Attention of Students in the University Classroom Through Creative Touches

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## Abstract

Visit any Higher Education institution, ask students how they are feeling, and questioners are likely to be surprised by a common response: "Bored!". This controversial claim is substantiated when lecturers honestly reflect on observed 'bored' learner behaviors in their own classrooms; these include heavy sighing, dull facial expressions, and poor posture. The negative effects that boredom, specifically academic boredom, can have on student attendance, learning and academic success collectively serve as the trigger for this Opinion piece, which advocates surprise as a stimulating approach to (re-)grabbing the attention of students in the university classroom. I passionately argue that surprise can be inspired using creative touches, which are defined and exemplified with both real and imagined practice to aid reader understanding and appreciation. A suite of stimulating surprises, in the form of practical ideas, is offered in the latter part of the Opinion piece for reader reflection, selection, adaptation and implementation, the aim being to stimulate impending/future practice that helps readers (as lecturers) to (re-)grab the attention of university students in their respective classrooms.

**Keywords:** Surprise; university students; academic boredom; attention-(re-)grabbing; lecturers; creative touches

## Introduction

Even though the numbers do vary, Finkielstein suggests that there is 'a considerable body of evidence that as many as 40-59% of students [...] get bored at university' [1, p.1098]. I recall being aghast when encountering this statistic for the first time – *is it really possible that more than half of the students I teach are bored in my various classes?* Research by the publisher Wiley found that 55% of undergraduates admitted they were 'struggling to stay engaged and interested in their classes' [2, p.6]; for graduate students, the figure was 38%. With Abdellatif claiming academic boredom to be 'one of the most prominent psychological problems that university students face' [3, p.1], there is growing concern that this, as a distinct affective state, can severely hinder the learning process [see 4]. This Opinion piece locates itself at the heart of this discussion, arguing that lecturers need to grab the attention of their students (or re-grab it when their attention begins to wane) when in the university classroom. This, I assert, can be achieved through surprise. Back in 1973, Johnson suggested surprise to be 'a motivational device that we as educators should not overlook or underate' [5, p.13] – I maintain that this still holds true, 50+ years on. In support of this assertion, a refreshing discussion is facilitated that weaves together 'the personal, the professional

and the academic' [my words] into a rich written tapestry<sup>1</sup> that sequentially explores perspectives of surprise and its role in education and learning, recognises everyday signs of academic boredom in students [6], and investigates how creative touches [7] can inspire a wealth of surprise in the university classroom via illumination (explanation) and illustration (exemplification). The discussion opens with a succinct exploration of definitions and descriptions of surprise.

## Surprise: Definitions and Descriptions

Efforts to discuss surprise initially require an appreciation of the literature which attempts to define/describe it. Of surprise (!) is Munnich *et al.*'s assertion that its definition 'has never been a simple matter' [8, p.40], this being reinforced by Modirshanechi *et al.* who state that, definition-wise, there is 'no consensus' [9, p.1]. The Oxford English Dictionary [10] describes surprise as 'an unexpected occurrence or event', a sentiment that Mellers *et al.* [11, p.3] build on by identifying it as 'the sense of astonishment

1 By way of surprise, various presentation devices are purposefully distributed throughout the Opinion piece to visually (re-)grab the attention of the reader to inspire full engagement with the text.

and wonder that one feels toward the unexpected'. Additional definitions and descriptions across multiple fields acknowledge a plethora of ways in which surprise is recognised:

- a basic emotional response across cultures [12].
- an 'automatic reaction to a mismatch' [13, p.133].
- being related directly to expectation [14].
- 'stem[ming] from an event that is simply difficult to explain' (original emphasis) [15, p.1].

Understandably, wordage limitations for this Opinion piece prevent the facilitation of an in-depth critique of surprise, definitions/description-wise. Instead, whilst the 'complex and suggestive rather than precise and definitive' nature of surprise is accepted [16, p.179], a purposeful subscription to the following reduced definition is made: 'an emotion typically resulting from [...] the detection of novelty in the environment' [17]. This largely resonates with my personal perception of surprise (I am always taken aback by the overnight appearance of snow on the ground), and is of particular relevance when discussing surprise in the context of professional activities:

Picture this: you're in the middle of a mundane video conference when suddenly, the speaker reveals an unexpected twist, catches your attention, and leaves you utterly surprised. In that moment, your expectation is shattered, and you're fully engaged. Surprise [has] an incredible power to captivate an audience and inject excitement. [It creates] a sense of novelty, disrupting a predictable flow and stimulating our brains [18].

Through a process of synthesis, I am able to use the discussion above to clarify what surprise means to me from a professional perspective (academic and teaching):

*something that is perceived as being unusual or unexpected; something that is (momentarily) attention-grabbing; something that yields a response, be it mental or physical.*

Articulating this is important as I have been passionate about the necessity for surprise in education for most, if not all, of my professional life. Looking back on my practice as a lecturer to date, I can recollect rolling a giant fabric die around a chemistry lab (I needed a number between one and six!), working-in-role as a moody Master's supply tutor, opening a lead lecture with the oral recitation, from memory, of Harri Webb's *Never Again* poem (six stanzas) [see 19, p.92], and having a (planned) heated debate about theories of learning with a colleague in front of 150 stunned undergraduates! Justification for the employment of these practices is far removed from assumptions of blatant glory-seeking or sensational risk-taking, instead being more rooted in an informed appreciation of different perspectives of surprise and the role it plays in education and learning, to which this Opinion piece briefly turns its attention.

## Surprise: Perspectives and its Role in Education and Learning

When reflecting on influential theories of learning, Yiannoutsou finds surprise to be relevant to the constructivist approach to education (original emphasis):

by postulating *that knowledge is actively constructed through the [learner's] interaction with the world*, [this emphasises] teaching not just as a process of directing learning towards a strict known end but as a process of *offering opportunities to [learners] to engage in hands on explorations that fuel the constructive process* (Ackermann 2004: 18)' [20, p.373].

This, in part, resonates with the philosophical thinking of Martin Buber (1878-1965) who recognised the central role that surprise played in education. Buber asserts that a 'real lesson' should be 'neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises' [21, p.241]. Stern builds on this, arguing that, in the context of schools and schooling, 'planning is necessary, [yet] surprises are inevitable, and it is the presence of surprise that makes a school educational' [22, p.45]:

Schooling that is creative and filled with hope will also be surprising; schooling that is wholly predetermined, certain, and perfect (at least in its own eyes), will be unsurprising --- and also uneducational.' (ibid.)

I firmly believe that the thinking above is pertinent to the Higher Education context. All students deserve a stimulating university experience, one which is both educational and fuelled by creativity, hope and, most importantly, *surprise*. I cannot stress (literally) the final consideration enough. The necessity for surprise is emphasised by Manuella [23] who recognises its many benefits for students, these being offered as per her original emphasis:

**Surprise upends what learners believe and helps them to make discoveries[,] giving strong opportunities for independent learning. Socrates and Aristotle thought that "surprise combined with astonishment is the beginning of knowledge". This effect brings about **questioning** and **reappraisal**, both things which give fresh momentum to **curiosity** and therefore learner **engagement**. It will also enable greater memorization – faced with the surprise effect, learners will have to use all their senses and all their concentration to **analy[s]e the surprise component**.**

For various readers, especially those with an understanding of child development, Manuella's thinking is nothing new; indeed, Foster and Keane argue that there has been a 'long-standing view that surprise plays a key role in learning' [24, p.76]. Support for this is acknowledged in the work of Adler, whose essay passionately argues that surprise 'is of great value for learning', affecting students positively given that their 'attention is aroused and

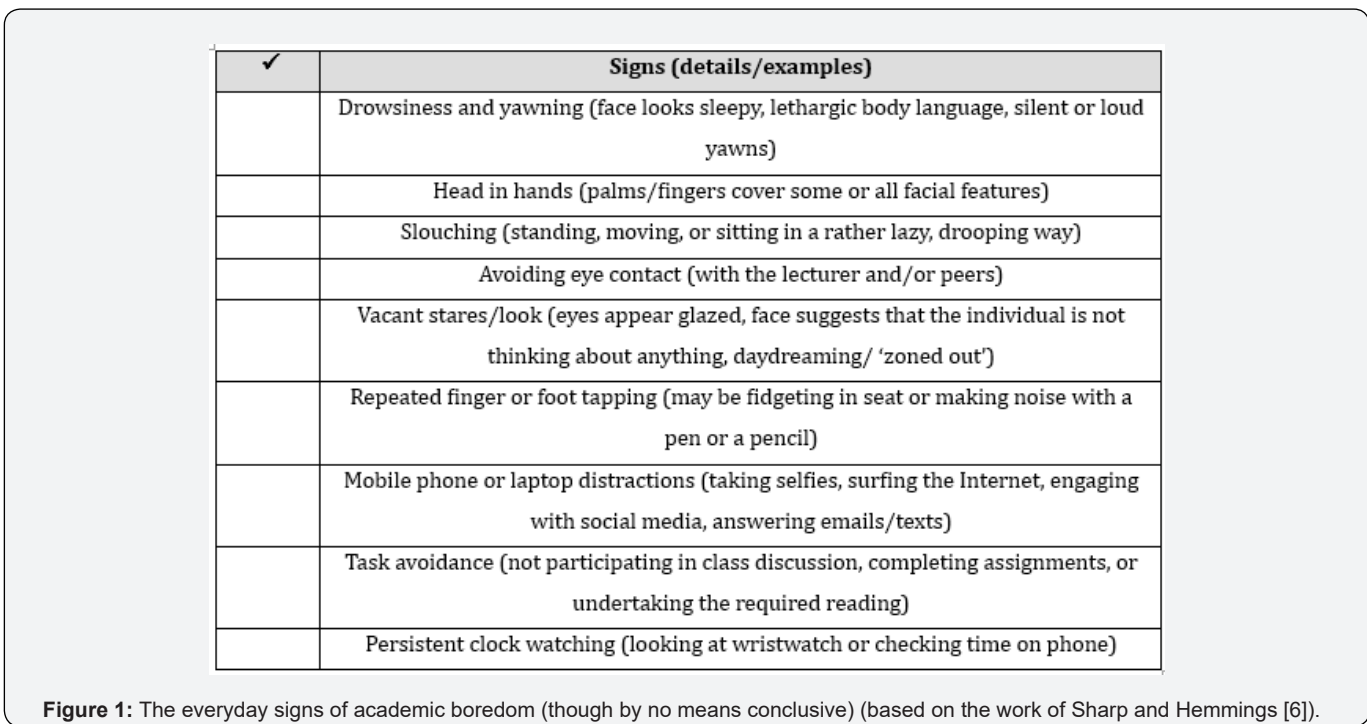
focused self-critically on a failure of their subject matter-related expectations, providing them with reasons - a call to explain - to correct and to better understand' [25, p.147]. The importance of this arousal cannot be underestimated - '[o]ur brains ... are constantly in search of stimulation' [26] - especially given there is evidence to suggest that lecturers are fighting to combat 'a largely negative and deactivating achievement-related emotion known to impact usually adversely on student engagement and performance' [27, p.145]: academic boredom<sup>2</sup>.

**Warning! Incoming controversial claim!**  
 There are students in every university classroom across the globe right now who are academically bored.

<sup>2</sup> This differs to boredom which 'Greenston (1953) described [...] as an experience associated with a negative attitude toward an activity, along with a reduction of physical actions, an inability to specify what one desires, a passive attitude hoping for a change from an external source, and a sense of time distortion' [29, p.120].

Readers are likely to question this emotive statement, defensibly arguing that this does not apply to *their* classroom given that they put into practice 'the higher education literature [which] encourages active learning, student engagement, and a learner centered environment' [28, p.18]. Readers, however, are invited to take a moment for honest reflection, using Figure 1 as an interactive prompt: *how many of the listed signs (behaviours) have you recently seen in the students you work with when in the university classroom<sup>3</sup>? Please tick as appropriate.*

<sup>3</sup> This also includes the lecture hall/auditorium, the café area for relaxed seminars/workshops, tutorials held in an office, laboratories (science; computer), studios (e.g., dance), a courtroom, private/communal study spaces.



Any demonstration of these signs by students in my various classes has always been of personal concern, not just because these are distracting/disconcerting when I am delivering a lecture or facilitating a seminar, but also because I have always prided myself on striving to deliver taught sessions that are both educational and engaging (not entertaining). Tze *et al.* [29, p.140] suggest that behaviours such as those offered in Figure 1 ('signs') should be of professional concern to lecturers given that academic boredom 'has the greatest adverse impact on students' learning motivation and their use of adaptive study strategies, followed by its negative impact on achievement'. To combat the above, Finkielstein recognises a wealth of coping strategies that university students embrace to tackle academic boredom; these

include talking to classmates, reading books/newspapers, and 'preparing for other course-related activities, such as tests or exams' [1, p.1109].

*But what can lecturers do to (re-)grab the attention of students who appear academically bored?*

Fortin and Gonzales in Carle [30, p.1] advocate an intriguing teaching approach called *pedagogy of the unexpected* that has 'the goal of surprising and shaking things up for the students to grab their attention, stimulate their memory and encourage their active participation'; this is achieved through a combination of (but not limited to) the following:

- a captivating and yet relaxed atmosphere,
- ‘various methods and materials: paper, cardboard, lights, costumes, tools, surprising objects, enigmas, drama capsules, role playing’ (p.1),
- ‘a touch of emotion and enthusiasm to the teaching relationship’ (p.1),
- building trust by ‘expanding and strengthening interactions between individuals ... promoting active listening’ (p.2), and
- humour of the teacher to defuse ‘moments of instability and insecurity within the group’ (p.2).

Of personal interest is the way Florin and Gonzales in Carle [30, p.1] are able to ‘harness the element of surprise, curiosity and humour as sources of motivation to promote learning’ in their classrooms. Their practice serves as the fuel for my professional conviction that lecturers can and should (re)grab the attention of their students in the university classroom by way of surprise. This, I assert, can be inspired through the use of creative touches.

### Creative Touches: Illumination and Illustration

The idea of creative touches was borne out of a research study that sought to explore student perceptions of creative ways of

demonstrating their summative learning at the university level in England [31]. As part of an online survey, respondents were asked in what ways their summative unit/term assessments – think essays, reports, and presentations – could be made more creative, presentation-wise, through their inclusion/use of creative touches, examples of which included comment bubbles, different languages, infographics and textspeak. Research findings, yielded from respondents across the undergraduate, master’s and doctorate portfolio (n=27), suggested that the use of creative touches could “provide more information and strengthen the argument [in an assignment] than [just] text, if used properly” (doctoral candidate), opening the assessment up “to be more representative, personalised and accessible” (master’s student). I argue that the inclusion/use of creative touches as part of the practice of lecturers is an inspired way of stimulating surprise for students in the university classroom.

By way of illumination (explanation), I define creative touches as alterations and additions [7, p.68], the former referring to the “tweaks” or modifications [7, p.69] that are made by lecturers to their instructional materials, with the latter referring to the inclusion of new and innovative ideas that complement and enhance the taught delivery/learning in the university classroom. By way of illustration (exemplification), an adapted case study by Brownhill [32, pp.13-14] is offered in the shaded box:

I was invited to deliver a lead lecture on the development of children’s writing (birth-to-11-years) to trainee teachers as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Education English course at a prestigious institution in the east of England. Being mindful that the lecture was to take place on a Friday morning, following an intense period of school placements for all trainees, I embraced a select number of creative touches as part of the lecture content/taught delivery:

- I showed Bason’s (2012) ‘Dough disco’ video (*YouTube*) as an energetic (and humorous) illustration of fine motor exercises that could be undertaken to prepare young children for writing – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-IfzeG1aC4> (addition).
- Trainees were invited to compare their personal writing grip with their peers, attempting to write with their non-dominant hand to practically experience the demands of handwriting (alteration – the original plan was to simply discuss select points drawn from a recent research paper).
- I shared lived experiences of different ways I had stimulated children’s writing in schools through the use of unusual surfaces, e.g., my work shirt (accidental!), walls (using water and paint brushes), and playground tarmac (addition).

I believe that lecturers in all disciplines, especially those linked to education and language studies, can use surprise (inspired by creative touches) in their practice to (re-)grab the attention

of their students in the university classroom. The ideas offered in Table 1 serve as a suite of stimulating surprises for reader reflection, selection, adaptation, and implementation.

**Table 1:** A suite of stimulating surprises, inspired by creative touches.

<p><b>Addition:</b> ‘... project [a] PowerPoint presentation on the ceiling to force students to attend part of the class [by] lying on rugs on the floor or ... hide questions under desks for a review activity’ (Fortin and Gonzalez in Carle) [30 p.1].</p>	<p><b>Alteration:</b> When teaching international students, deliver a small part of the taught session in their home language – think verbal (pre-record the input with the help of a native speaker) and/or written (translate the slide text using online applications).</p>
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<p><b>Addition:</b> Stachowiak advocates the bringing in of a prop: ‘One of the most memorable classes in my doctoral program[me] involved a guest speaker bringing a gift bag and setting it in the front of the class. He didn’t say anything about it, at first. But we were all captivated by it from the moment he brought it in. He brought in the unexpected. It turned out to be a \$10 paperback book – one of his favourites about leadership. We valued it much higher than that because of the way in which he used it to get our curiosity going as to what was inside that bag’ [33].</p>	
<p><b>Addition:</b> Present students as Knowledgeable Experts by drawing on their previous working roles and experiences to stimulate taught input, e.g., a former Personal Trainer might advise the class to ‘KISS’ their instructions [Keep It Short and Sweet] when teaching young people team/individual games as part of Physical Education.</p>	<p><b>Addition:</b> Embrace the art of storytelling as a way of helping students to ‘make sense’ of taught content [34]. Research [35] found that teaching using stories led to improved student performance, with learners having a more tangible grasp of the topic and of the relationship between concepts.</p>
<p><b>Addition:</b> Dabell encourages the use of music in the classroom (adapted): ‘Playing music can ... help enhance a [taught session] because it possesses neural firepower, and it has a powerful effect on learning. Music can radically change the mood and atmosphere of a class in a second and can prime the mind for learning. You could play music when [students] come into [the classroom] or at key points in a [taught session] to change direction. Music [be it gospel, classical, jazz, or hip-hop] can be used as a backdrop, to rejuvenate, to demonstrate, to neutralise, to pacify and to add warmth [to the learning experience]’ [36].</p>	
<p><b>Alteration:</b> Present quoted text (written) to students using speech bubbles, along with an audio recording of the text (sound button) and an image of the associated theorist, animating this using free online photo animation apps to visually bring the faces (and verbally bring the thinking) of key scholars to life.</p>	<p><b>Addition:</b> Invite students to demonstrate what they have learned in the classroom through one of four main forms: Visual, Written, Spoken or Performance, selecting from one of the <i>101 Ways to Show What You Know</i> (available as a free PDF from <a href="https://www.fortheteachers.org/creative-ways-to-show-what-you-know/">https://www.fortheteachers.org/creative-ways-to-show-what-you-know/</a>).</p>
<p><b>Addition:</b> Cullen argues that lecturers should ‘make smartphones your best friend’. By integrating them as a central part of the learning process, lecturers could use tools like <i>Mentimeter</i> where students can use their smartphones to ‘test their knowledge, start discussions, and ... ask ... the right questions at the right time’ [37].</p>	

Readers will note that there are more additions offered in Table 1 as opposed to alterations. This is reflective of the wealth of ideas that are readily available (online) for lecturers who want to include new and innovative ideas that complement and enhance the taught delivery/learning in their classroom, e.g.,

Kevin Yee’s *Interactive Techniques*, a growing compendium of over 220 ideas [38]. To ensure a degree of balance, Table 2 offers readers a selection of alterations that can be made by lecturers to their instructional materials – specifically presentation slides – to surprise their students.

**Table 2:** Presentation slide and text alterations [32].

Material	Examples
Presentation slides	<p>Surprise students with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Reduced text’ slides which just offer a key word, a short phrase, or a succinct quotation (how about just a single letter, e.g., ‘Q’ [meaning ‘Questions’]?). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Text which differs in size, colour, and font, both between and within each slide. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A mix of background colours used for individual slides.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Subtle, exciting, and dynamic transitions to creatively switch between different slides.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Animated text – think in terms of entrance, emphasis, exit and motion paths – to visually ‘stagger, stress, remove and move’ [my words] the slide content.</li> </ul>
Presentation of the text on the slide	<p>Surprise students by stylistically presenting text extracts on select slides using a variety of ‘visual vehicles’ [my words]:</p> <pre> graph TD     subgraph Grid         S1[Short story] --- S2[Instructions] --- S3[Social media post] --- S4[Script]         S2 --- S5[E-mail] --- S6[Reflective journal] --- S7[Song lyrics (chorus)] --- S8[Timeline]         S5 --- S9[Dictionary definition] --- S10[Advert] --- S11[Speech] --- S12[Brochure]         S9 --- S13[Letter] --- S14[Report] --- S15[Poem] --- S16[News bulletin]     end                 </pre>

The suggestions in Table 2 are also applicable and adaptable to other common materials lecturers use/refer to when in the university classroom, e.g., lecture notes, handouts, unit/module booklets, and readings/reading lists. An inspired way I have personally found to be effective in surprising students is not just through visual alterations (as per Table 2), but also via alterations which promote interaction with the instructional materials. Illustrative ways that this can be achieved include:

- Rather than presenting the learning objectives at the start of a taught session, surprise students with a blank (titled) slide, inviting them to predict (verbally/in written form) what they think the learning objectives might be, this being based on their prior scanning of the instructional materials. These could be reviewed as part of the plenary to the taught session.
- Offer students individual slides with missing words, surprising them with .....demarked spaces....., rectangular boxes, or lines which signal that students need to “be on the lookout” for key text [visibly **stressed** on the lecturer’s presentation] which they need to add to their version to make it ‘full’/‘complete’.
- Surprise students with a series of statements on a slide which they have to interact with (physically/digitally), e.g., rank order them by number, establish which of the statements are true or false, highlight which is personally perceived to be the most important statement, or connect them with a line to an associated author’s surname/year citation.

### Conclusion

Fuelled by personal, professional, and academic concern/thinking, this Opinion piece has passionately advocated surprise as an inspiring way for lecturers to (re-)grab the attention of their students, its use being purposeful in attempting to combat academic boredom – a ‘negative deactivating goal achievement emotion’ [39, p.123] – that is commonly found in the university classroom. Through the inspiration of creative touches, a suite of stimulating surprises has been offered for readers to reflect on, select from, adapt (as and how necessary) and integrate in their professional practice. The rich potential that is facilitated by creative touches means lecturers, with confidence and care, can actually “tweak” other aspects of their practice to surprise their students, illustrative examples of which include:

- Seating – surprise students with unusual arrangements of moveable tables and chairs, e.g., zig-zag rows or *Tetris*-style.
- Incorporating the arts – surprise students with purposeful opportunities to explore body percussion, engage in paper folding (think fortune tellers), or animate sock puppets.
- Game play – surprise students with adapted versions of Hamm’s six games [40] (I personally like and have used an adapted version of Game 2: Snowball fight).
- Assessment – surprise students with innovative strategies to review classroom learning, e.g., *Loop dominoes* and

*Sewing cards* [see 41, p.175].

Despite the strong advocacy for surprise in this Opinion piece, along with the array of surprises that can be inspired via creative touches, readers should be mindful of the following:

1. Not all students will like the surprises they encounter in the university classroom (they may induce anxiety for some students (and for some lecturers)).
2. There is no assurance that the surprises lecturers integrate into their practice will be effective, i.e., (re-)grabbing the attention of students.

As such, readers are encouraged to embrace an enthusiastic attitude towards surprise, recognising that its impact on students can only be known if lecturers creatively experiment with it as part of their impending/future practice. By way of a final surprise, the words of Florin and Gonzales in Carle [30, p.4] are combined with my own (*italics*), purposefully closing this Opinion piece with a lasting piece of advice:

[the] diversity of strategies [...] maintains the element of the unexpected with students and lets us [*lecturers*] surprise them to encourage learning. However, this strategy can in fact lose its effectiveness if misused or overused [...]. One must strike the right balance – *avoid surprise repetition in the same taught session* – and above all, vary the sources of stimulation *to sporadically surprise your students, and sometimes your good self*.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no economic interest or any conflict of interest exists.

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