

COURSE SPOTLIGHT: CS1050X

PROFESSOR CREATES MEMORABLE LEARNING EXPERIENCE



DR. VAZIRANI

IMAGE: Dr. Vazirani

BY KARTHIK NARAYAN

Of the many computer science courses taught at Georgia Tech, perhaps one of the best is the CS 1050X course. Taught by the lively Dr. Vijay Vazirani, the course is among the most anticipated and popular courses. Several students, including myself, deferred taking CS 1050 to later semesters just to take the section offered by Dr. Vazirani. With only around thirty slots available and over sixty students attempting to sign up for the course, students often snipe Oscar every five minutes to check if a spot opens or if their overrides are processed. Even after the first week passes, several new faces appear in class. When these students are asked if they are new, they reply that they want to just sit in on the class and see what it is like.

Such is the fame of this course. So, what makes this course tick?

No course can thrive in popularity without that zing and oomph. True, it's difficult to lay a finger on exactly what these aspects are, but Dr. Vazirani has been able to harness CS 1050's sparkle and turn it into something else.

it is classes like Dr. Vazirani's that can reverse this trend... [the course] is key to ensuring that the best students are not subjugated to slower-paced [curricula]."

Patrick Dillon, a student who took CS 1050X in the spring of 2009, said that Dr. Vazirani's methods of teaching "allowed the student[s] to speak their minds as

"BY CREATING A CONVERSATIONAL ATMOSPHERE... STUDENTS TAKE A TEAM-BASED PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH."

Constantly cheerful and encouraging students to do their best, Dr. Vazirani keeps the classroom entertained. Gone are the old ways of teaching where a professor lectures in a monotone voice by drawing dull diagrams and giving PowerPoint presentations. According to Abhishek Shroff, a CS 1050X alum, "[Dr. Vazirani] made sure that no student was left behind in the course, while at the same time, ensured that the... ones with more background knowledge had enough to think about."

In class, Dr. Vazirani usually introduces a concept, which takes about thirty minutes of the hour and a half class. The remaining hour is devoted to a problem solving session. By creating a conversational atmosphere where students take a team-based problem solving approach, Dr. Vazirani drives in what the real work in the industry is like. A series of problems related to the concept is usually described, and the class is challenged to arrive at a solution.

As many jobs are starting to outsource to foreign countries, the demand for the skills which Dr. Vazirani offers is very high. Michael Qin, another alum, said, "I believe

he provided slight nudges and insights to the key aspects of the problem[s]."

At the surface, these problems seem to be superficial. However, as the students solve the problems, they discover gilded treasure troves, where all sorts of seemingly unrelated concepts suddenly coalesce. By building bridges across various fields, Dr. Vazirani is able to bring out the true beauty in mathematics and convey this message to students, an exceptionally rare quality that I haven't seen in any other professor or teacher in my career as a student.

Dillon further said that he "firmly believes that the reasoning skills students learn in Dr. Vazirani's classes will continue to be of use for the rest of their lives, either directly applied or as a firm foundation to build upon." In fact, the classes of 2008 and 2009 have both had students attend the prestigious BOLD internship that Google offers. For now, it looks like the course has taken a brief lapse in the course listing schedule, but we look forward to seeing it back on track next year! ■