

Teaching by Lecture

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Even though I spend my weekends traveling across the country telling people that lecturing is one of the least effective pedagogical strategies, I am invited to the University of Chicago to speak on lecturing. So I need to do some back handsprings here. Basically, if you have a large class, lecturing is justified to a certain extent, but it is an activity that I think needs some very careful examination. What I'd like to do is get you to think about how the way you establish the classroom defines the role of the student, the role of the teacher, and the process of learning. In other words, when you select a pedagogy, you should select it consciously, knowing what it is you are doing to yourself and to your students, rather than just selecting the pedagogy that's easiest or most familiar. Pedagogy has content how you teach is to a large extent what you teach.

Traditional learning, or lecturing, is probably something that most of you believe you need to practice. It's what I did when I started to teach. It's attractive because it is familiar. You may think that it is a fairly difficult thing to do because you have to overcome stage fright and maintain a relatively stable posture, yet it also seems relatively easy because you've seen it done. Watch small children playing school. What does the teacher do? The teacher lectures. It's what you've been prepared to do. Your mind has been filled with knowledge which you are now ready to give back. It also seems easy because you're totally in control. You may not think you are, but you are. The students don't know what will happen next. You are in control of the agenda. You're the one who says, "Today we will talk about Wordsworth." They didn't ask for Wordsworth. They probably had a clue about your lecture topic from the syllabus and previous lectures, but you're the one who knows exactly what's going to happen. You're the one who has planned what questions to raise and not raise. You are in control of the organization of the course and the students, unless they get up and leave.

In addition, lectures are a relatively attractive form of teaching because they allow you to do everything that gets you high evaluations on standard teaching forms. I don't know what your forms look like, but ours have a numerical rating scale asking for an evaluation of things like the teacher's knowledge of the material. If you lecture, you know all the things that the students don't, so you look knowledgeable and get high ratings. On our forms, students are also asked to rate the organization of the course. Provided that your lectures are coherent, you are also likely to be graded rather high for the organization of the course.

Finally, the construction of a lecture seems relatively easy because it, too, is a very familiar process. It's what you do every day. That is, you prepare research, you write papers, you prepare class presentations and seminars, and you work on dissertations. It means going to the library, finding out about something, thinking about it, and then writing it down. The only thing that seems different about a lecture is that you have to stand up and deliver it. In other words, you take what you've done as a graduate student, and you convert it into a teaching process. That makes it familiar. I would argue that there are better ways to prepare lectures than that.

Avoid the term-paper lecture. If you have to lecture, I recommend that you design your lecture to cover material that has not been covered by the students or to structure the material that they have read in a new way. Students quickly figure out that they should either read the book or go to the lecture because they are largely redundant in most classes. In other words, students figure out either that the teacher is clearer than the book or that the book is clearer than the teacher and design a study process around that. The best sort of a lecture should consist of a conversation among the text, the teacher, and the student. For that to happen, the teacher and the text can't be conflated. A book is more useful for people finding material initially. The lecture that surrounds the material should either translate that material into a new language or provide outside material that puts the text in some sort of context. That is, the lecture ideally sets up the text, provides transitions among class discussions, and then summarizes.

Because it is spoken, a lecture's structure must be clear. If I had a blackboard, one of the things that I would do today would be to write out the four or five points that I am going to make in the hopes that then you could follow this lecture more easily. Another thing that I am trying to do in this lecture is to say constantly, "This is what I'm going to say and this is what I've said." As you go through the lecture, you need to mark exactly where you have been and announce where you are going. If you are lecturing from the moment you walk into the classroom until the moment you leave a large class, then you have to be especially clear about where you are going. Of course, the whole lecture makes sense to you. It is wholly formed in

your head, but it is not wholly formed in the minds of your students, so that you need to mark and highlight your main ideas as you go through.

If you question articulate students about lectures, they'll say, "I write down everything that the teacher says because I don't know what's important, but I figure that by the end of the semester, I'll be able to go back in order to outline and underline." That's a bright student. The students who are not so articulate or who don't quite understand the lecture format will take everything down and never be able to sort the trivia from the main idea unless you are constantly repeating that main idea. If I said that Eugene O'Neill was wearing green pants when he wrote *Long Day's Journey into Night*, most students would write that down. They wouldn't know whether five minutes down the road the fact that he was wearing green pants will be important. They can't tell what's coming. You've got to tell them what's coming in order for them to know exactly what it is that they should be writing down, what they should be listening for.

You need to structure a lecture in terms of repetition and pacing of examples. When someone is reading, they can go back and figure out what your thesis is. They can go back and check the reference. The listener can't do that in a lecture, and, as a result, you have to keep the pace going at a rate that the students can follow. You need to build in as much as possible the movement between the abstract and the concrete, the difficult concepts and the application of those difficult ideas. If you write or speak continually in the abstract, then the students are not going to have time to assimilate what it is you're saying. If you present an idea, then exemplify it, and then give another idea, and exemplify it, and then repeat the main point of your lecture, you've probably put together a lecture that someone can follow.

Another thing that you have to do is consider the way you deliver your lecturestalk to, not at, your students. If I am beginning a lecture and I look out at a blur and not into the eyes of the students because I'm thinking about what it is I'm going to say next, then I know that my tone of voice shifts. I know the placement of my voice shifts, and the students feel they're being read to, rather than talked to, even though my eyes may not be going along a piece of paper. I know that I did this when I began to teach because I was defensive. If I didn't look at the students, I couldn't see that they didn't understand. Try as much as possible to communicate and watch people's eyes. It's hard, but you have to do it. Sometimes it is very discouraging because you see people staring at the ceiling, looking at the door, and falling asleep. But that's to be expected. It's legitimate. People's minds wander. That's one reason why you repeat things. Address the student, not the material.

I would urge you to think of lecturing not as an interaction between you and the material (with the student looking on) but as a direct interaction between you and the student. In my field, for example, I could sit down and prepare a survey of drama by defining the material that must be covered, saying "I'm going to begin with Ibsen, and I'm going to end with Beckett, and I want the whole thing in chronological order. Here are the major authors that I have to include." But there's another way to prepare lectures, and that is to ask yourself, "What do these students know? What do I want them to know? What have they read? What have they done?" This completely shifts the lecture format.

These two methods of preparing a lecture define the relationship between teacher and student very differently. The traditional, material-driven lecture usually assumes that the students exist as empty vessels that will be filled by the knowledge of the instructor. We walk into these lectures, making some basic assumptions about what students know, and we begin talking. In this kind of classroom, the teacher sets the agenda and defines the questions to be asked as well as the language in which they will be discussed. This format assumes that students are empty slates to be written on. But, I would argue, we really know very little about students. If we don't know what interests (both personal and academic) they have brought to the classroom, how can we speak to them? If we do not think about our students and their needs, we are performing and our students are merely spectators. In the current educational jargon, we are active, and they are passive.

Now you may think that it is easy to make assumptions about students' preparation in upper-level courses or courses with prerequisites, but, even then, we can never be sure what our students know. My favorite example of this happened in my opening lecture in a modern drama class. I talked to the students about the format of Victorian melodrama for over twenty minutes. Then I spent another forty minutes talking about the Victorian spectacle theater, which achieved exaggerated effects, like burning ships on stage. Now, I thought that I had clearly established that melodrama as a dramatic form and spectacle theater as a style. I asked the students later if they would please write down for me something that showed the influence of

melodrama in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and tell me why it was melodramatic. As I looked at their responses, I saw that almost every one of them was saying, "This particular character's action is melodramatic because it's exaggerated." What I had forgotten after twenty years of teaching drama is that there is a common use of the term "melodrama"! The students had taken the lay notion, of melodrama as exaggeration (as in "Oh, don't be so melodramatic!") and laid it on top of my lecture. Working from this perspective, they conflated my discussion of melodrama conventions and my description of spectacle theater, and they ended up equating melodrama with exaggeration. Now, I was going to use the word melodrama for twenty-five more lectures. If I kept using a term as I meant it, and they kept hearing something entirely different, we would have been talking two different languages, and they would have learned all sorts of incorrect things about melodrama.

What I should have done was to ask myself before that lecture, "What would a student think melodrama is?" Because I hadn't asked that question, I wasted a whole lecture. In fact, I had to go back a second day and tell them that I had goofed. Basically, I had to deliver the lecture again, but this time saying, "You think melodrama means this, and that's legitimate, but I'm going to use a new definition." My students walked out of that first lecture thinking they knew exactly what I had said. Everything that they thought, every misconception, was confirmed. I walked out thinking I had done a good job. They laughed at the appropriate spots, but no real communication had taken place.

A second, and slightly different example, comes from my husband, a mathematician in computer science. When he tells students that they should work together when they write their computer programs, they think that "working together" means producing identical products. Rather than seeking knowledge from one another and then using it to create their own version of a program, they simply copy each other's programs. So my husband has to identify and correct their preconceptions before they can follow his instructions.

Don't wait until the final exam to find out that they don't have a clue to what you have been saying. My first year of teaching I taught an introduction to drama course in which I taught many plays that had phallic imagery in them. On the final I gave them a series of things to identify and tell whether or not they were significant. One student in the class wrote after every object, character, and idea, "This is phallic." When she failed the exam, she came to see me because she didn't understand why. I told her I really didn't see how this leaf that fell from the tree was phallic. She looked at me and said, "Well, you see, it was phallic to me." When I asked her what she thought phallic meant, she replied, "Well, it's something abstract and indefinable. You can't really put your finger on it." When I explained to her what it meant, she turned red to at least the top of her head. When this student heard all my lectures filtered through this notion of phallic, she thought that I was just standing up there saying, "This stuff is really difficult, isn't it?" In other words, my lectures made no sense to her at all. So, please consider what your students know and create some ways to find out what they don't know.

What are some ways to overcome your blindness to what students know? The traditional way is to quiz them. The quiz, like the lecture, is formulated in the teacher's language. If you don't agree with the teacher or think like the teacher, you're not going to do well on the quiz. And quizzes that are graded don't give the students time to admit ignorance. They will do their best to disguise ignorance in a quiz. What you need to do is to provide students with an opportunity to give you honest feedback on what it is they understand and don't understand. For me, that means giving them an opportunity to talk to me privately and providing an opportunity for them to raise their hands and ask questions in the middle of the lecture. By talking to them, you discover that the girl in the front row who doodles incessantly understands the material beautifully because somehow doodling is necessary to her thought process.

Unfortunately, office hours and class discussions both intimidate many students. Even more productive is asking students to write a five-minute response to questions posed during the lecture. For this to work you need to tell your students that the question is not going to be a quiz, that it is not going to be graded, and that you want them to respond honestly. I let my students know that, if they didn't do the reading, I would much rather see them write, "I'm sorry I didn't read *Death of a Salesman*, but let me apply your question to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*," rather than try to b.s. their way through *Death of a Salesman*. I also tell them that, if they say that repeatedly, week after week, then it will affect their grade. Although I do not grade these responses, I read them and keep a record of them. Students must complete twenty-three out of twenty-five to be eligible for an A in the class, twenty-one out of twenty-five for a B, and so on. Of course, their grade is determined by papers and exams, but the responses make them eligible for a certain grade.

This procedure ensures that students come to class, do the reading, and listen to my lecture. I'm enough of a ham that I want an active audience.

The sorts of questions I ask come in various categories. The application question lets me know whether what I said makes sense to them. For example, during the melodrama lecture, I might say, "I've just given you the abstract concept of melodrama. Find me an example of melodrama in the play you read today and tell me why you think it's melodramatic." If they say, "I'm really not sure, but here's what I think," it doesn't matter because I just want to know what is in their minds at that moment. Confessing ignorance is as acceptable as demonstrating mastery. You can also give your students what I like to call stretch questions, which tell you how far they can take what you've just said, and how they think, which is valuable information. For example, after delivering a lecture on a play that caused the Irish to riot violently in 1905, I will ask, "Why do you think these people rioted?" Now, some students will speculate based on their knowledge of history; some will speculate purely on human grounds, and others will speculate on aesthetic grounds. That doesn't matter. I just want to see what they will do, so I'll know what they're capable of. These are very different questions than the standard quiz question, What did I just tell you?

Sometimes I carry this technique one step farther. I ask my students to write down three questions concerning the play that they've read. Then I ask them to choose one and tell me why they think it is an important question to ask. This engages them in independent learning, and it tells me what they're interested in. It tells me whether they can define a useful question. When I'm really feeling full of piss and vinegar, I will say, "Give me your questions, and I will design the lecture around those questions." When you're lecturing on familiar material, you can do that because, believe me, the questions they ask will be relevant. You discover some very interesting things when the students, rather than the material, set the agenda.

When you are thinking about ways to make the students more active in a lecture, don't always present the knowledge of your subject as a series of solved problems. In other words, begin to open up those problems to discussion, and you will begin to get a dialogue. Monologue essentially presents knowledge as problems that have been solved. Even the fact that the problem isn't solved becomes itself a solved problem. For example, if you say, "There is no answer to this question," that becomes in itself an answer. Thus, if you're communicating a set of solved problems to your students, you are also communicating to students ideas about what learning is. You are teaching them your solutions to a bunch of problems, rather than teaching students to explore problems and discover what they really are. If they're going to understand what it is you do, they need to see you ask those questions, too.

Another way to think about this issue is to think of a typical lecture as a magician pulling solutions out of a hat. This was brought home to me when I was teaching a survey on Romantic Poetry. I was lecturing on why a poem by Wordsworth was funny, and all the students were writing down, "The poem is funny." It was a solved problem. None of them had laughed when they read it. None of them were laughing at the time they wrote it down, but it was unquestionable: "The poem is funny." Now, that didn't strike me as odd at all at the time. It was a piece of knowledge I was giving them. In the middle of what I thought was a wonderful lecture, a student sitting right in front of me started to wave her hand insistently. I knew, from the first set of papers, that she was far from the brightest student in the class. She was a freshman and clearly didn't have a lot of background in literary criticism, much less poetry. I was hoping she would just give up, but she didn't. Finally, after I decided there was nothing else I could do, I called on her, and she asked me the best question a student has ever asked. She said, "If you weren't an English teacher, how would you know that poem was funny?"

With this one question, this student had cut to the heart of the problem. She was basically saying, "I don't think the way you do. I don't know whether I want to, but I wish you would at least show me how you got that rabbit out of the hat." I couldn't answer the question; it sent me home to redesign the syllabus and directed my attention toward this problem of taking the students into account. What she was saying was "Stop giving me solved problems and show me how to solve my own problems. Explain to me this strange universe that you inhabit." The students who were English majors in the classroom probably had the same question. However, they realized it was a question from outside the inner circle. She was betraying ignorance, but the question was invaluable, and I told her so. Any field has an insider's code that won't make sense to your students. As a graduate student, you learn to write and speak within the context of your field, though it might seem like total nonsense from the outside. You learn the language of the discipline.

Undergraduate students rarely have that language. Therefore, you need to find out where they have come from in order to take them anywhere.

If you are responsible to the student rather than the material, you can avoid the evils of the lecture that popular culture lampoons so easily. In the recent movie *Real Genius*, for example, there is a running gag as a college lecture hall filled with eager students, who are all scribbling exactly what the teacher is writing on the board, is transformed from scene to scene. One by one, the students are replaced by tape recorders until the hero of the movie and the professor are the only two human beings in the room. The day inevitably arrives when the student walks into the classroom, and the teacher, too, has been replaced by a tape recorder that is speaking to all the other tape recorders. The teaching scenes in another recent movie, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, also mock the emphasis on material over students. Ferris's history teacher is always shown asking students to fill in the blank in his sentences: "And that was the Gramm-Rudman Act of 19 . . . anyone . . . anyone . . . 1987." As the students sit in stony silence, the audience laughs through recognition. They remember the sensation of being like cattle with rings through their noses leading to a tether in the teacher's hand. If your lectures sound like either of these, then I would argue that you may be teaching material, but you are not teaching students.