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How to Lecture Effectively

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Lectures sometimes get a bad rap, criticized for being a boring one-way monologue that just presents information rather than making students think. However, studies show otherwise, a 2012 study of 15,000 Quebec university students being the latest example: “Students are old school – they want lectures (Charbonneau). They want to listen to a professor who’s engaging, who’s intellectually stimulating and who delivers the content to them,” says Vivek Venkatesh, associate dean of academic programs and development in the school of graduate studies at Concordia University.

Why Lectures are Important

- Lectures can provide more up-to-date information from the instructor’s own research (or that of colleagues) than exists in printed form (even on the Internet).
- Lectures allow for tailoring of information to fit the background and interests of a particular audience.
- Lectures can summarize in one place information scattered over a wide number of sources.
- Lectures can explain the significance of information and describe how pieces of information fit together or are otherwise connected, especially how to evaluate the quality of online information.
- Lectures can explain and demonstrate how to get the most out of reading, how to study effectively, how to complete assignments, how to critically analyze and problem-solve.
- Lectures can model good academic practice with respect to such things as citation, critical inquiry, the scientific method, discipline-specific practice, and presenting facts and data effectively for particular audiences.

Before the Lecture

Lectures need to be about teaching, not just disseminating information. They need to use stories, examples, question-and-answer, etc. to evoke students’ pre-existing knowledge and to build upon it, and provoke thought, reflection, and put students in the position of grappling with concepts as a means to learning them deeply, refining their mental models of the topic, and elaborating on/encoding ideas sufficiently that later recall is possible.

The lecture content needs to be chunked into small but meaningful parts that students can “process,” and build in pauses, and redundancy to facilitate reflection.

Don’t write your lecture word for word, since reading from lecture notes prevents eye contact with audience, and that limits engagement and makes students passive. It’s better to have an outline with

graphic representations, such as tree diagrams, flow charts, network models, Venn diagrams, drawings, and other pictorial representations from which to lecture. Consider progressive reveal of visual components to maintain student interest. Even better, provide your visual organizers to students as handouts or online. Insert delivery instructions in your copy of lecture outlines, such as “put on board,” ask for show of hands, put students in pairs to discuss this.

Check out your classroom in advance, noting the desk layout and podium configuration. Decide where you will stand and how you will move from one place to another, and try out any audio-visual equipment you plan to use.

Practice your lecture beforehand, especially the main parts of your first few lectures (introductions and conclusions at a minimum), checking pacing, timing and whether amounts of material fit the allotted time. Plan the main points of your whole presentation, but allow for some spontaneity. Plan time for students’ questions and think of how you can incorporate them into the lecture as a means of conveying the material. You are aiming for an informal, conversational tone that conveys your interest in and enthusiasm for your subject.

Lecture Delivery Tips

- **Take along a bottle of water.** Sipping water is not only a good way to soothe a sore or dry throat but also provides thinking and note taking time between ideas and before responding to a student question.
- **Arrive at class early** so that you can welcome students, interact with them and create positive rapport. Address them by name as much as possible, and stay after class to chat with students and answer their questions.
- **Aim for an extemporaneous quality conversational tone** to your delivery. Consider the lecture an opportunity to speak with the students, not to or at them. Look for and respond to your audience and the feedback they’re giving you and adjust your pacing and tone accordingly.
- **Get and keep attention.** Use a “hook” to heighten interest, such as a question or item of interest from their experience, or using examples to which they can relate. To keep attention, use methods that get students to think actively about the content being presented. Have an activity every 15 to 20 minutes that gets students doing something, like explaining their understanding of a concept with a peer, question-and-answer, discussion, a group activity such as a “jigsaw” (students learning part of a concept and explaining it to others in a small group, each of whom has learned a different part and take turns), using “clickers” to answer questions, an Internet search, etc. This then “resets” them for the next 15-20 minutes.
- **Maintain regular eye contact** with your students. By doing so, you create connections with them, are able to gauge their note-taking, and discourage disengagement and distraction.
- **State your key concepts as clear learning outcomes or objectives** for each lecture, ones that set a high but achievable standard and intellectual challenge. Tell students what they will learn, how they will learn it, and what they will be expected to do with what they learn. Keep the lecture

outline visible, either through notes on a board, projection on a screen, or through note-taking outlines.

- **Establish interest by indicating the relevance** to students and create explanations that students can understand because they connect what they know from previous courses and experience to new content.
- **Convey your enthusiasm for the material and your concern for student success.** Vary your vocal speed and pitch, as well as your facial expressions. Smile often. Consider using humour when appropriate to maintain attention.
- Ask periodically to **ensure students can hear and see everything**. Make changes to your volume and visual aids as necessary.
- Move around the room, and use natural gestures. This movement is especially important for engaging large classes. Changes help to refocus students' attention, but remember to move with purpose so you avoid distracting your students.
- **Draw or use visual representations.** Write key words. Summarize periodically. Use "content processing" techniques such as minute papers (literally, short "papers" that students can write in a minute that provide feedback about how well they are understanding topics, that you collect but don't mark), discussion, debates, pros and cons with students switching sides. Use analogies, metaphors, and stories for abstract concepts.
- **Show and explain the "big picture"**—how today's concepts relate to previously presented material, how they fit the overall discipline framework, what their significance is in the overall scheme of things.
- **Use students' questions to teach**, rather than treating them as interruptions that get you "off script." This may entail dealing with a topic out of sequence (if the content area allows for such things) and then skipping that topic later.

Things to Think About

Good teaching tries to help students feel that a subject can be mastered. It encourages them to try things out for themselves and coaches them on how to succeed. If students know you care about their success, they will be forgiving of less-than-spectacular oratory.

Encourage, facilitate, and coach note-taking. "Note taking involves elaboration and transformation of ideas, which increases meaningfulness and retention" (McEachie, 59) Consider providing "skeletal notes outlines," with topic outlines and space in which students can add notes, in electronic and print form for students to use in class (whichever fits their note taking methods). This reduces the volume of frantic note taking, providing more time for students to reflect on what they hear but sufficient tactile involvement to "process" the information.

Explain your teaching methods to students and tell why you use them from the point of view of how they benefit students. This helps students reflect on what methods they use to learn, and sets them on the road to becoming self-managing learners.

Chunking, pauses, and redundancy help students master the essential ability to keep things in memory while taking notes, simultaneously reflecting on the significance of the ideas and figuring out how they fit together and relate to one another. Explain and facilitate this through coaching in class lectures.

Help students “deep process” new knowledge by asking them to provide examples from their own experience, write better notes by summarizing, translating ideas into their own words, and showing relationships rather than just memorizing. Provide tacit knowledge of the process of critical thinking (methods, procedures and conventions used in the field). At the outset of a course go more slowly, pause to let students take notes and write phrases that sketch concepts and relationships between the parts.

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