



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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THE DEATH OF THE LECTURE REVISITED

About seven years ago, Alan Altany (then director of the Coulter Faculty Center) sent an e-mail manifesto to WCU faculty. Originally circulated nationally, the manifesto, called for the death of the lecture on the grounds that it was ineffective, anachronistic, and uncreative. Teaching and learning, it said, have entered a new era and the time is ripe for faculty to face up to that fact and to find better alternatives. Had it been a petition, Alan asked, how many of us would sign it? The responses largely took two forms. In the first, faculty called for the head of the lecture (so to speak) to be placed on a bloody stick and paraded about so that others might recognize its demise. In the second, faculty vigorously defended the lecture, citing the weight of tradition behind it. There was little middle ground in the debate, either on our campus or in the literature published nationally. Since the manifesto was circulated, the call for a cultural change in higher education continues to be sounded and the lecture still serves as the flag bearer for tradition. With the large influx of new faculty at WCU, I thought it might be interesting to open up this can of worms once again and to see where we stand today.

Teaching and learning in higher education are often characterized as going through a revolution from an *instructor-centered* to a *learning-centered* paradigm. Our new faculty, then, are the vanguard of this revolution. It is likely that many of them have been more strongly acculturated into the strategies and tactics of this revolution than the rest of us. The presence of faculty development centers has been growing, as has graduate teaching assistant training. Concepts such as Bloom's taxonomy, backward course design, service learning, etc. have higher profiles and even those without education degrees are increasingly likely to have been exposed to them. Also, with a growing body of educational literature that demonstrates successful models for moving beyond the lecture and into more creative forms including group work, role play, and multi-media, new instructors have an enticing buffet of options from which to choose their teaching styles and methods. By crowding out the lecture in this way, though, we have created an awkward generational gap that has not existed before. For many of us, the revolution has made it so that we can no longer teach as we ourselves were taught and the transition to new styles of teaching and learning has been uncomfortable, awkward, cumbersome, and/or incomplete. Now, newer faculty are more likely to have been exposed to the revolutionary approaches as students (though not necessarily at the Research Institutions that generate the majority of PhDs) and to model their own teaching after what they have experienced. The teaching effectiveness of these same new faculty is going to be evaluated by a very different generation of faculty to whom these methods are revolutionary, even confrontational, and it is going to be measured, most likely, by assessment instruments developed prior to this Revolution.

The literature on teaching and learning methods is voluminous and the conclusions drawn vary widely and wildly, but the one argument that does seem clear is that the lecture is one of the least effective ways for students to learn. These studies are being done, though, by the revolutionaries who are seeking to identify and encourage new methods. I have often questioned if they are giving the lecture a fair shake. First and foremost, I personally do not believe there is such a thing as 'a lecture' anymore than there is

such a thing as 'a painting'. In other words, some lectures are the equivalent of Dogs Playing Poker and some are closer to the Mona Lisa. It is an art form and, as such, cannot and perhaps should not be aggregated. As an art form, though, it is difficult to assess. The lecture is designed to impart knowledge in a different way than other forms of teaching and so holding them each to the same standard or final outcome seems to me to be fraught with difficulties. A very good lecture does not simply impart information, but also provides a framework for organizing and thinking about that information that may not bear fruit until years later. The Vermeer of lecturing can impart a subtlety and a passion to his or her subject matter that would be very difficult to capture on a multiple-choice survey of learning. Perhaps the difficulty lies with us. Just as there are few master painters, there are few master lecturers and it is likely that most of us will never be that good, no matter how hard we try. Perhaps the difficulty lies with the students. Much of the impetus to kill the lecture comes from student feedback. In a McUniversity world, they are the consumers and we often move to give them what they want. But, what they want, what they think they want, and what they need may or may not be one and the same. It seems to me that at least in some cases, it is no surprise that students ask for teaching methods that demand less of them. The solution seems to lie in finding solutions in the assessment and research methods rather than, or in addition to, the teaching and learning methods themselves.

The different sides of this discussion remind me in many ways of the debates surrounding the European Reformation in the sixteenth century. The passion of the defense of tradition, on one hand, versus the zeal of reform, is a dynamic with which Luther, Calvin, and Loyola would have been familiar. In the case of the Reformation, though, there was a voice of reconciliation, that of Desiderus Erasmus. Erasmus scolded Luther for being too impetuous and wanting to throw out hundreds of years of tradition on often dubious grounds, a characterization that could fit educational reformers. On the other hand, he also scolded the Catholic Church for abusing its position and for being out of touch with broader generational changes, a characterization that could fit many of the defenders of the lecture. Erasmus did propose a solution back then and he wrote letters to representatives on both sides in an effort to carry it out. Tradition and reform, he argued, can intermingle and the differences between the two sides, he believed, were not so overwhelming or fundamental, that reconciliation was not possible. A department could, for example, allow for a range of instructors and teaching and learning styles. While it has not been studied (much) at the level of the major, I would not be surprised to find that students appreciate such variety. Erasmus believed that the humanist-inspired principle of balance and harmony might supercede the black-or-white absolute mentalities that characterized Reformation rhetoric. If one were to take the lecture and add interactive elements to it, thus balancing some of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the different teaching methods, perhaps one could find a middle ground.

In his own lifetime, Erasmus was largely unsuccessful and the Reformation tore Europe asunder for many years afterward. The conclusion to our story remains open but I believe we are closer to the denouement than we were seven years ago. It is really up to us, as faculty, whether we will take on the wisdom of Erasmus or whether we will continue with the equivalent of decades of strife and warfare. The fate of our old friend, the lecture, hangs in the balance.

By Laura Cruz
Associate Professor of History

A note from Vera Guise, Faculty Fellow for Publications

You may respond to Dr. Cruz's article by clicking on this link; <http://media.wcu.edu/groups/facultyforum>. Your comments will be automatically posted to the Faculty Forum website.

Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

Responses to Catherine Carter's "Let's Grow WCU While Supporting the Region" (9/1/08)

Jane Nichols

Where do I co-sign? I wholeheartedly agree. If we are to become a 'greener' and more sustainable campus and institution, we need to support LOCAL business.

Nicole Pekarek

I agree that local businesses ought to be considered before chain stores as part of our millennial campus. I would like to see those local businesses open 2nd locations, or relocate here close to campus if they have not already done so. I also would encourage variety as part of the new town center and an inviting, come sit awhile attitude for whatever businesses are involved.

Eric Hendrix

I signed Catherine's letter and don't have much to add except I'd prefer the Cullowhee project NOT include a Fresh Fish Market:). To have the most positive local impact, Western needs to continue energizing local businesses. Thanks, Catherine, for composing the response and Vera for posting it for feedback.

Sharon Jacques

I signed Catherine's letter and don't have much to add except as a WCU faculty member for 34 years, I have seen a lot of growth in supportive "services" both on and off campus. I adore City Lights, and I usually bought a lot of books they brought to early Christmas Bazaars on campus. I fear that this excellent resource is not on the "map" that many students have of WCU and would like to see a Cullowhee presence. I have watched numerous locally-owned and -operated eateries of varied quality open and close on sites near campus, and I suspect that rising rents have driven some of them away. What national chain store does Cullowhee really need? I would vote for a Kinko's!

Karen Lunnan

Thank you, Catherine, and others in the English department for articulating this important issue. I've just returned from a visit with my family in New Jersey and I admit to having a frappicino with my sister at Barnes and Noble. We had our pick of literally hundreds of national chain stores to meet our needs. Know what she loves to do when she visits Jackson County? Visit Annie's, Mad Batter, City Lights, Spring Street and Lulu's (among others). These businesses are unique and good for so many reasons. Let's support them... not put them out of business. I can visit NJ and all of its national chain stores. I have chosen to live in Jackson County for the last 30 years because it is unique and good.

Myron Coulter

My thanks and congratulations to all of you who had a hand and a mind in revitalizing the Forum. We also owe thanks to Dr. Judith Stillion, who shepherded the beginnings of the publication in the early days of our Institute for College and University Teaching (ICUT) a groundbreaking program, state-wide and well received, and now defunct. Keep up the good work and please send me a copy of the September issue.

A Brief Message from Vera Guise, Editor of the Faculty Forum

The Faculty Forum has, for more than 20 years, served as an avenue for faculty to start conversations about current needs and issues at WCU. With the September issue, the Coulter Faculty Center launched a new era by moving from hard copy to digital download as a means of resource conservation. Thanks to Neil Torda's able assistance, we have now added a discussion board to allow for real-time conversations about those topics. It is now possible to leave your comments directly on a new wiki website we have created for the Faculty Forum. Just go to <http://media.wcu.edu/groups/facultyforum> and you will be able to read and comment directly on each article. At the bottom of each article is a button that says "Add a new Comment." Just click this button and log in using the same username and password you use for your WCU email. Not only will you be able to comment directly on the story, but we are hoping a real dialogue will be created by faculty responding to each others comments. The new wiki resulted in great feedback from last month's issue! Check it out and add your comments to this month's feature article. Keep them cards and letters comin'!