

Lecturing Revisited

The appearance in October of my Faculty Forum opinion piece, "Lecturing as Learning," brought me a number of responses and it has become clear that the main gist of my argument was lost to some readers. I would like to clarify several points.

1. I was not arguing for a return to a single "medieval" method of education, for there never was a single medieval method of educating (although many moderns think so). I fully acknowledge that lecturing is "only one method of educating," as one responder put it. I never said nor implied that lecturing is to be preferred to group discussions or other methods of educating. I simply pointed out that the assumption that lecturing only transmits information is mistaken. Just as there is a rich array of learning styles, due to the diverse, complex character of humans, there must also be a rich, comprehensive spectrum of teaching and lecturing styles.

2. From (1) it follows that I was not advocating that all instructors make their classes into "lecture courses." Sadly, we must admit that there are a number of lecturers who are truly boring teachers, not only in many undergraduate and graduate courses far, far from here, but even at our own institution. So, I don't find it surprising that some people report very unsatisfactory experiences with teachers as boring lecturers. However, even responders who reported a preponderance of bad lecturers in their educational experience prove my point. As one responder conceded, "at their best lectures can inspire, model organized thinking, or transmit new information." In the same spirit of fair generalization, I can concede that bad practitioners of lecture exist, and it still does nothing to my argument, since I was pointing to the best examples of **lectio** in the richer senses of instructive discourse, reading as interpreting, and correcting. Simply because there are bad practitioners of a pedagogical method does not prove that the method is no longer valid. Were that true, then group discussion, dialogical interaction, problem-solving, and Socratic dialectic must also be abandoned.

3. I was also not assuming that all our students, nor for that matter, all disciplines, are homogeneous (though they are less "heterogeneous" than we might pretend). I acknowledge heartily that the nature of teaching is presently different from what it once was (though I suspect that an incomplete knowledge of the history of education tends to exaggerate differences). I am very aware that learners are not a homogeneous group focused on acquiring "knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone." In fact, the sources for this shift from theory to utility of knowledge are fairly easy to trace: over-specialized faculty with

little liberal education themselves, misreadings of John Dewey's concept of "practice," American educators' over-emphasis on immediate usefulness, domination of education by method and technique rather than content, job skills taking precedence over making humans self-critical thinkers, etc. Does that mean we must give up trying to show the long-term advantages of knowledge for its own sake? Hardly. What we must question is the facile assumption that the latest fads in education, current student wishes, or present administrative and legislative thrusts represent anything more than short-term thinking. Even by present lights, since students' interests (and jobs, hence educational needs) will likely change many times in their lives, we are serving our students ill by not teaching them to value knowledge for knowledge's sake, since the appreciation of learning itself will last long after current trends and present interests have faded into the dust.

What is most disconcerting about some of the responses I received is not their advocacy of alternative or optional methods of educating but the degree to which they uncritically mimic current educational pedagogies. The conclusion from several respondents and the reigning pedagogical theory is that the lecture is dead. In its defense, I have argued theoretically that such an assumption is false. Many advocates of more recent methods, though admirable for their tenacious inquiries into the learning structures of students, have ignored dogmatically the multilayered dimensions of the pedagogy of the lecture. That dogmatism emerges in remarks like, "lecturing is not a strong pedagogical technique today." Empirically, we know this to be false, from the many adulatory comments by students about a number of spell-binding, enlightening lecturers active on this campus alone. Other respondents are a bit more modest as they urge that perhaps we just need to "keep lecturing in its place." Although that moderate position may sound enticing, it is not truly representative of either the richness of good lecturing or of the more radical "anti-lecture" educators. As an example of the latter, one may consider this posture: "we need to liberate education from the method of passing on corpses of information to that of interacting dialogically on living issues" (Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, Pedagogy for Liberation). The principle operant here is not "keeping lecturing in its place" but not allowing lecturing any sort of place in the allegedly vast, pluralistic repertoire of education. Counteracting such intolerance of lecturing was my original concern. We must at least acknowledge that lecturing has a rightful place in current pedagogy, or else we must give up the pretension of being pluralistic, diversified, and inclusive.

Finally, my concerns connect with a theoretical position, but on the level of actual practice, I (as well as others) engage in a mixture of lecture, dialogue, and group discussion (depending on what content will best be served by which methods). I am not committed to lecture as the only pedagogical method of educating. However, it is time that we acknowledged not only the heterogeneous character of our students but also of our professors. If it is true that teachers, no less than students, have different ways of gaining insights and of sharing those with others, surely one of those ways is through dynamic interaction with a text or another person, and that may be done just as well by one method as another (given that one is concerned with learning together, not with badgering students).

Modern education is continually tempted, rather simplistically, to think polaristically, and one example is the notion that we must move from the old, "bad" teaching paradigm of lecture to the new, "good" learning paradigm of education. Perhaps it is time we recognized that no single method is a panacea for the problems of education. Perhaps what we need instead of a **lectio**, or perhaps even

a diatribe, is a **colloquium**, a conversation, that is, between colleagues whose minds are open even to ideas that are not in fashion.

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