

Lecturing As Learning

In recent years, many people have argued that the academic lecture is pedagogically ineffective, that it assumes passivity on the part of the student and mere transmission of information on the part of the teacher. In the place of lecture, many have proposed case method studies or group learning projects. While it is certainly worth our while as teachers to experiment with varied methods of teaching, where feasible, we might do well to question certain assumptions that perhaps underlie this rejection of the lecture in favor of case studies or group learning.

In a lively historical survey of the history of the liberal arts ("A Historical Perspective," in Rethinking Liberal Education, edited by Farnham and Yarmolinsky), Bruce Kimball points out three faulty assumptions that "case methodists" make about lecturing:

1. They assume that lecturing involves mere "transmission" of information ("telling" by the teacher in a dictatorial way to passive receptors, i.e. students) while case method does something very different. However, even in case method classes, an individual student may talk for only a few minutes and must listen to other students who are then transmitting material to them. So, if lecturing is at fault for involving transmission, so is case method.
2. Another faulty assumption is that listening does not involve the student actively and dynamically. However, Kimball notes that most students believe that something "dynamic" occurs when they listen to rock music. If this is true, then the mere act of listening is not a passive one. Certainly, every person has had the experience, at least once in life, of listening for an extended period of time to a speaker who inspired and informed him or her. Anyone who has ever heard Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech, for example, will attest to the dynamic power of a great speaker. I suspect that most of us who now teach can trace our own involvement to an individual lecturer who inspired us by her or his dynamic way of bringing a topic to life.
3. Many modern educators assume that when lectures "merely convey information," students do not "analyze, synthesize, or evaluate." This implies that lectures are transmitted without interpretation. However, if information is being conveyed, how can it be heard, let alone cognitively processed, without being interpreted? Any teacher who has looked at notebooks or journals from students is amazed at the vast number of ways that students understand or interpret the material. In fact, when we talk of how good teachers make difficult concepts accessible we are implying that students are actively processing the concepts and admitting that the different approaches the teacher takes are appealing to the different ways students analyze and synthesize, that students are not simply passive receptacles.

Kimball recounts how the case method of teaching originally appeared and eventually came to dominate pedagogy in American law and business schools. The philosophical roots of this methodology were John Dewey and Progressive education, which led educators to reconsider (1) the active, participatory role of the student, (2) learning as a cooperative, democratic undertaking, and (3) the posing of problems as a central way of engaging students in dynamic forms of inquiry. However, when the practices of law and business schools were adapted to other areas of higher education, modern advocates of case method made all sorts of invidious, uncharitable criticisms of the traditional lecture method of teaching.

The modern academic lecture originated in the "lectio" of the medieval university. The "lectio" was in some cases an instructive discourse given before a group or in other cases the act of reading from a book as a group listened. However, from its very inception, the university regarded interpretation as an important part of the transmission in the "lectio." Kimball cites a thirteenth century master's description of the lectio method to show the rich, complex structure of learning appreciated by the medieval instructors. This medieval master distinguished five different aspects involved in the method of lectio:

- a) summarizing each topic that will be covered in the text
- b) explaining in clear, distinct language the import of each topic
- c) reading of the text in order to correct it
- d) briefly restating the meaning of the text
- e) resolving conflicts and adding subtle and useful distinctions as well as questions

What happens in the mind of the audience when a speaker is dynamic? The audience is not simply in a trance. In the process of perceiving the dynamic quality of the lecture, the listener is helping to create that dynamic quality. When young people listen to their favorite rock music they "get" something. It's the same music for those of us who don't get anything, so doesn't it appear that the listener is bringing something dynamic to the process of listening? When the medieval audience heard the "summary" of topics to be covered, the listener was recognizing the summary as such and also recognizing it as an effective or ineffective summary, thus actively participating in the construction of meaning that the lecture entailed. In any lecture, for communication to occur, the listener has to participate cognitively or the lecture will seem "boring." When a lecture seems exciting to the listener, it's because the listener is participating intellectually as a receiver and processor of the message. And many lectures, like the medieval lectio, are revisionist in nature, "correcting" a text by commenting on it. For the medieval and modern listener alike, the process of "correcting" a text involves as much responsibility for the receiver of the message as it does for the sender. Cognitively, the listener must recognize that in the act of correction one interpretation is being modified or even being replaced by another interpretation. Thus, the process of receiving is by nature an active cognitive process.

It is, of course, possible that even with a brilliant lecture the listener may, for one reason or another, not have gotten "tuned in." Great lecturing is certainly more than simply being a great showperson. But part of the great lecturer's skill is the ability to "read" the audience and know when it needs a slower pace, another summary, a restatement of a point in different words, a provocative question, or even a rest period to process what's been covered so far. Perhaps the key to the great lecture with any group of students is the strategy we use to prepare the student to listen well.

It is evident, I think, that the lectio, especially as perfected by Erasmus and other humanists, required from the audience a great deal of interpretation for its successful execution. Contrary to the assumptions of modern critics, the lecture, at least in its origins and mature development, was a lively, richly interpretative enterprise. It is surely possible to imitate the success of the Medieval lectio and highly likely that the best current practitioners can duplicate its dynamic quality in the context of the modern academic lecture.

Daryl Hale, Philosophy & Religion