

Are You Not Entertained? How to Build a Dynamic Lecture

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Since the 1990s, I've mothballed *the lecture* -- "where the teacher talks and hopefully the students listen" -- with other scorned practices: popcorn reading, multiple-choice quizzes, test-prep drills, lower-level "recitation" questions, crossword puzzles and the like. But the fact is that few practices are completely bad or good given the infinite variety of students, curriculum choices and instructional strengths. Besides, making teachers wrong for professional choices blunts their power. I'll come back to that idea.



After dipping into the controversy over lectures, the paragraphs below will explore why this instructional method deserves some love, followed by tips on how to enhance its impact.

Debating the Lecture Method

Most educators agree that since the Middle Ages, the lecture has been over-used. Where agreement ends is on the question of its advantages and disadvantages as an instructional approach. These are just a handful of reasons to abandon lectures:

- Studies (most of them in higher education) report that the "[educational yield from lectures is generally low](#)."
- Graham Gibb's seminal 1981 paper, [Twenty Terrible Reasons for Lecturing](#), argues against the notion that we can efficiently "beam" knowledge into learners' heads.
- [Students prefer fewer lectures](#), perhaps because of short attention spans.
- Most professional teaching associations [support more interactive instructional methods](#).

On the other hand, several strong arguments support the use of lectures:

- Some studies report that [lectures lead to higher student achievement](#), although this might be due to some instructors' lack of skill in facilitating student-centered interactions.
- As opposed to [whole class discussions, which can leave students bewildered](#), a thoughtful oral presentation can guide students into productive modes of thinking.
- Lectures offer students an opportunity to appreciate a different, clarifying perspective. Indeed, a lecture can make "an argument, complete with evidence and conclusion. It becomes an [illustration of an educated mind](#) reasoning within a particular discipline."

How to Build a Better Lecture

Because all teachers at some point find it necessary to lecture, we have a responsibility to maximize our capabilities as oral presenters. Here are some tips for doing just that.

Know and Communicate Your Goals

Make your objectives clear to your students up front. A 45-minute video, [How to Speak: Lecture Tips from Patrick Winston](#), demonstrates this technique. I was hooked when Winston claimed that his speech "could make the difference between a career-launching experience and career-busting experience."

Engage Your Audience Immediately

Students might not share your passion for Shelly, or Pythagoras, or the Magna Carta. *Shocker!* One solution is to inject some novelty into your lecture. How?

- Ask students to tweet a question they have about the topic, and make it your mission to answer the questions in your presentation.
- Find a thematically related work on [PoemHunter](#) and read it to provide context. Connect the topic with [contemporary music](#) or [personalities](#) relevant to kids.
- Tell a story about the content. Decades ago, one of my high school teachers started class by describing a boy named Mike who never opened his history textbook. After graduating, Mike joined the army and was killed in the Tet Offensive. That story introduced an unforgettable lecture on the Vietnam War.

Mix It Up

Don't be a purist. Use different styles, formats and media when you lecture, like [Pecha Kucha](#), the [60-Second Lecture](#), or the [Punctuated Lecture](#). Joan Middendor and Alan Kalish collected dozens of "change up" lecture strategies that I refer to several times a semester. And the [Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard](#) links to dozens of lecture innovations, including [Twenty Ways to Make Lectures More Participatory](#).

Interact with Your Students

Great teachers and orators listen. They're so attentive, they can detect when their audience's breathing changes. To them, lecturing is an intimate act -- a quality that is missing from online video lectures. They leave time for questions at transition points. But don't start these interactions by asking, "Any questions?" According to [Stanford's Teaching Commons: Checklist for Effective Lecturing](#), it is more helpful to ask, "What parts of this are still a little unclear or confusing for you?" or "What do I need to explain again?"

Bring Great Materials

For advice on creating engaging lecture handouts, read Anna Johnson's [Good Handout Design: How to Make Sure Your Students are Actually Learning from your Lecture Notes](#) and Oliver Adria's [How to Write a Presentation Handout: 5 Effective Ideas](#). Also avoid [bad PowerPoint](#).

Less is More

Lecture less frequently and keep your presentations short. For most students, a talk that extends beyond 15 minutes is a misery safari.

Don't worry about using the "wrong" instructional method. Deepening your professional skills and reactions to how students experience your methods is *always* the right approach. The power of professional wisdom was expressed best by Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: "People who have never worked with steel have trouble seeing this . . . Steel can be any shape you want if you are skilled enough, and any shape but the one you want if you are not."

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