

IN DEFENSE OF LECTURING, OR: IT'S TIME TO CUT DOWN ON TV IN THE CLASSROOM*

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Abstract

In our desire today to avoid boring our students, the use of ancillary devices in the classroom--such as audio-visual equipment and even computers--has upstaged and obscured the real purpose of formal schooling. That purpose is: the acquisition of a body of knowledge and a fund of skills that outside of schooling would be either impossible or extremely difficult to acquire on one's own. The ultimate purpose of schooling, in other words, is to save the student time. My contention is that in today's context the lecture is the best method of fulfilling this purpose.

INTRODUCTION

The "disease called entertainment" is how David Ogilvy describes humor and other educational devices that upstage and obscure an advertisement's selling message. The principle--of one thing getting in the way of something else that is more essential--applies equally to teaching and learning. For Jacques Barzun (1968, pp. 70-71), it is excitement that gets in the way of learning. "The fallacy of excitement is so generally misknown that it is worth a few more words. 'Exciting' is not in fact synonymous with 'interesting,' it is usually its opposite. In excitement, time goes fast and thought is blurred. In a stretch marked by interest, time goes slowly, every minute is savored and its passing regretted." For Barzun, learning requires discipline, even drudgery, and discipline demands action--mental action on the part of the learner. And this mental action, I might add, is preeminently an individual process.

I need not cite the unending stream of reports about how badly educated our students today are; we see the evidence in our classes. (One only wonders how many of today's professors could pass the 1914 college entrance examination reprinted recently in the Wall Street Journal (1989); I cannot pass it--I only wish my education had been half as good as the education high school students apparently got in 1914.) My thesis is that, in our desire today to avoid boring our students, the use of ancillary devices in the classroom--such as audio-visual equipment and even computers--has upstaged and obscured the real purpose of formal schooling, which is: the acquisition of a body of knowledge and a fund of skills that outside of schooling would be either impossible or extremely difficult to acquire on one's own. The ultimate purpose of schooling, in other words, is to save the student time. My contention is that in today's context the lecture is the best method of fulfilling this purpose.

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THE PURPOSE AND VALUE OF THE LECTURE

Exhibit 1 reproduces a page from my Principles of Marketing syllabus. This statement of teaching method indicates the purpose and value of the lecture and also introduces what I call the "3-step plan to in-depth learning." Let me elaborate.

Contrary to what progressive educators have been saying for some ninety years, namely that the lecture became obsolete with the invention of the printing press, I think the lecture's primary value is its ability to aid comprehension and retention. By presenting the essentials of a subject, the lecturer reinforces what is important in the textbook. By adding new material to provide a context and to illustrate the hierarchy of the subject, the lecturer enables the student on his or her own to file new knowledge under the appropriate categories and in the appropriate order. Consequently, the lecture is (or should be) the archetype of the thought process applied to a particular subject, an example that the student can draw upon later in life as he or she learns new, related material.

Yes, you probably can "get it in the book," as progressives are quick to point out, but not usually in one term or one year. Several--often many--books must be read before most people feel secure in the understanding of a given subject. At least two books are required for us to become aware of the similarities--the common denominators--that comprise the essentials of the subject; a third book on a slightly different but related topic is often useful in teaching us the differences between one subject and another, i.e., in teaching us the broader context in which the subject arises. The lecturer, however, has (hopefully) read these many books; consequently, he or she can cut through the detail by making connections that the student who reads one book cannot make, and by providing background and additional illustrations that the one book does not contain. As a result, the student acquires a grasp of the subject--in one term--much faster than he or she would on one's own. This is what I mean when I say that the purpose of formal education is to save the student time.

To be sure, the student has not acquired the same level of knowledge or understanding as the lecturer. But it is or can be a level that is deeper than can be acquired through other methods. Indeed, in-depth learning in a limited amount of time is the aim of formal education. Yes, we can learn some things (occasionally) in bull-session discussions, but discussion-method teaching is antithetical to the thinking process (Peikoff 1984; Kirkpatrick 1987); besides, bull sessions belong in dormitories and pubs, or, at best, in the extracurricular activities of student clubs, which also is where the videotapes belong.

Yes, we can learn some things from watching a National Geographic special, or other videotaped program, but television in the classroom at best instills what can be called "headline learning"--not depth of understanding or integration. The textbook publishers (who already prefer four-color photographs to words) are not helping matters by supplying up to a half dozen videotapes to adopters of their books. Professors now can spend most of their time in class just pushing A-V buttons! Most importantly, however, television in the classroom confirms one point that needs to be erased completely from the minds of students (and professors): that learning is cognitively passive. It is indeed time to cut down on TV in the classroom.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LECTURER AND STUDENT

Lecturing of the type I have described is difficult. It demands a great deal of preparation, and a great deal of knowledge about one's subject. (Excellent discussions of the lecture method and lecture preparation can be found in Barzun 1944, pp. 31-46; Highet 1950, pp. 86-107; Higham 1974, pp. 172-180; and Satterfield 1978.) Consequently, I think senior faculty, not graduate students, are the only ones qualified to teach basic courses. I think senior faculty are mistaken when they look down on the Principles of Marketing course because they think it is boring or because they think there is nothing new in it to learn. I think the Principles course is the most challenging one of them all to teach--not because nonmajors must be motivated, which is indeed a challenge, but because the entire field of marketing knowledge that one has acquired to date must be condensed and summarized into a form that these students of many majors can grasp and appreciate.

Obviously, I do not consider delivery to be the most important criterion of a good lecture, as many public speakers do. Content and structure are what make lectures interesting. Entertainment is okay in advertisements, but only as long as the humor, the dancing, the music, etc., do not overshadow (or eliminate completely) the selling message. So also, excitement in the classroom--in the form of audio-visual presentations, humor, dramatics, even discussions, etc.--is okay as long as the tapes and slideshows do not overshadow (or replace completely) the knowledge that constitutes the core of the subject. A boring lecture that has content and structure is a contradiction in terms. Besides, I strongly suspect that many professors give up on the lecture soon after they begin teaching when they discover just how much preparation is required--and then the progressives welcome the initiate with an arsenal of rationalizations for not lecturing.

The responsibility of the student is mental activity--before, during, and after the lecture. (Lecturing of the type I am discussing is most certainly not "spoonfeeding"--i.e., the predigestion of material to such an extent that the students are treated like infants.) The student must read the textbook assignment before the lecture in order to establish a context in his or her mind. The student must listen actively to the lecture and take notes--the note-taking itself being an important part of the learning process. (But the professor shoulders the responsibility of delivering lectures for which notes can be taken.) The student, finally, must review and organize the notes, together with the knowledge presented in the textbook, into a few pages of study notes to be used in preparation for the examination.

All of this requires a great deal of effort on the part of students and the basic pattern has been discussed by Locke (1975, pp. 106-119). Step 3 of my "3-Step Plan" (in Exhibit 1) merely formalizes the process that many of the better students seem to utilize. The review questions that I hand out consist of between twelve and fifteen questions per set; the questions are in logical order, following the outline on the syllabus. If students answer the questions in preparation for the exam and end up with a large number of pages (i.e., ten-plus), I tell them to go through another cycle of answering the questions, this time striving to condense their notes to the one or two paragraphs per question that I suggest. Condensing and summarizing force the student, first, to think about the ideas--to chew and digest them--and, second, to isolate the essential ideas by discarding what is mere detail. "Discarding" does not mean that the details are forgotten; it means that they are filed in one's mind under the category "detail" but with a string attached to the essential ideas that are written down in the notes. The result is that the student remembers

the details by remembering the essentials that are tied to the details. Now the student is ready to "regurgitate" (yes, I accept the term!) the material on the exam.

Some students think they can split the questions--one student writing answers to the first half, another student doing the second half--then exchange answers. This, of course, does not work, because each student must do his or her own mental processing--there are no short cuts to learning. Of course, I tell them that there is nothing wrong with comparing notes after each has done all of the questions. Then, they can test each other, which is additional good practice or rehearsal for the exam.

GROUP THINK VS. INDIVIDUAL THINK

One last device, an outgrowth of progressive education's discussion-method of teaching, must be addressed. This is the group project, or so-called cooperative learning. Yes, some learning may take place in group assignments; most of the lessons, however, are very bad. As one professor put it: "Students learn effective ways to shirk. They learn to procrastinate, in hopes of getting someone else to do their work as the deadline approaches. They learn to avoid responsibility for their own work and to concentrate on getting into the 'good' groups rather than working well themselves" (Galles 1989). Or as the Underground Grammarian, Richard Mitchell, puts it: "It [the group assignment] is another of the educationists' self-serving delusions that if enough of the ignorant pool their resources, knowledge will appear, and that a parliament of fools can liberate its way to wisdom" (1981, p. 80).

But groups do not create knowledge, individuals do. The "teamwork" of the real world working environment that group projects allegedly simulate in fact aims at a goal that is the direct opposite of schooling: in business we apply knowledge through a division of labor, in school we (each and every student) acquire (or should acquire) all knowledge in a given course. There is no division of labor in learning--marketing majors (every one of them) must know depreciation, confidence intervals, discounted cash flow, breakeven analysis, and all of the essential concepts and principles of marketing--as well as how to type a presentation quality report. If the alleged purpose of group projects is to teach "people skills" or the art of "getting things done through other people," then our universities should have the decency to offer a course called "the art of negotiation," and then to teach and demonstrate the principles of negotiation. The way students are treated today, by throwing them into group projects in almost every course, is nearly the equivalent of throwing the proverbial chickens to the wolves. (The chickens, of course, get devoured in both mind and body but it is only the students' minds that get devoured in group projects. I will not dignify it by discussing the policy of giving a communal grade to every member of the group or of assigning group projects because the grading load for individual papers is too heavy.)

Learning requires individual effort--drudgery, as Barzun put it. "Lessons are taught in social institutions, but they can be learned only by private people. The acts that are at once the means and the ends of education, knowing, thinking, understanding, judging, are all committed in solitude. It is only in a mind that the work of the mind can be done. There is no such thing as 'collective thinking.' Our schools can be an instrument for socialization or an incentive to thoughtfulness, but they cannot be both" (Mitchell 1981, p. 82). The lecture method accompa-

nied by the 3-Step Plan To In-Depth Learning is designed to provide an incentive to thoughtfulness, not socialization.

CONCLUSION

Is lecturing the best method of education? No, I think the tutorial is better (see Highet 1950, pp. 107-116). And by tutorial I mean one student per professor at a time--not two, three, or ten. Ideally, tutorials combined with mass lectures--the 25- to 40-student classes that we have now are a bastardization of both methods--probably would be best, but today's government-monopolized education system precludes innovation and entrepreneurial competition to test the idea. The notion that tutorials would be prohibitively expensive is absurd. The California State University system spends over \$7300 per student on instruction, exclusive of capital outlays (The California State University 1988); give that money to a private tutor over a nine-month period for each student he or she instructs and I think you could end up with 20-40 highly educated students--and one relatively wealthy tutor! In other words, expensive buildings, land, and equipment are not necessary for sound education.

As one of my colleagues said recently, it is euphemism to call it "education" that millions of dollars are spent on every year at the primary, secondary, and university levels. An education is not what our students possess when they walk into our classes (see the latest horror story about what our college seniors do not know, in Bacon 1989). Will they have it when they walk out? That depends on the method of teaching that is used. To be sure, government-financed education to date has failed to produce any methods that can cure illiteracy; indeed, the government has contributed to it, most significantly by "look-saying" our students into conceptual remission. The ultimate solution, in my judgment, is to let the market decide. Education should be free--in the political sense of the word. The solution is the privatization of education, where innovative professors--or administrators, or outsiders--can be turned loose to compete for the minds of students. And marketing and the marketing concept finally can be practiced in the education market--through entrepreneurial competition to satisfy the objective education needs of students and not their subjective wants for four-color photographs, television, and easy-A's.

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EXHIBIT 1

TEACHING METHOD

This is primarily a lecture course.

The purpose of formal education is to save you time--the time it would take you to learn marketing, finance, accounting, advertising, etc., on your own, by reading books and trying to find the right people to question. Lectures and the "3-Step Plan To In-Depth Learning" can save you that time.

The 3-Step Plan

The acquisition and retention of knowledge is not automatic. It requires concentrated effort. The 3-Step Plan To In-Depth Learning is designed to help you understand marketing principles at a level that exceeds what can be achieved through other methods.

Step 1 - Take Lecture Notes. A well-organized lecturer presents his subject in terms of essentials. The spoken word, by its nature, cannot present the detail that the written word can. Hence, these "essentials" give you the necessary foundation and superstructure on which to base your subsequent learning. Lectures, in other words, emphasize and reinforce key points from your reading and add new material. Note-taking helps to integrate or blend together these key points and new material with your current knowledge. The act of note-taking, however, requires mental focus and comprehension--an active, integrating mind during the process of note-taking. This integration, in turn, leads to retention (as opposed to rote memory).

I want to emphasize the value of good note-taking. Recent educational research shows that "notes containing more ideas and more words are related to higher achievement" (Kiewra 1987, p. 235). In other words, take down as much as you can. This research also shows that students think the purpose of note-taking is to be brief, taking down only the key ideas they think they might otherwise forget. This is a mistake. One study showed that only 60% of the ideas the professors considered important were taken down in notes by the students (Locke, p. 107). When I was a freshman, I used to stop taking notes as soon as the professor said "for example"--on the premise that I already had written down the principle and that the examples are "just" illustrations. But when it came time to study for the exam, I didn't fully understand the principle--because I couldn't remember the examples.

Step 2 - Read The Text. Of course. But also: a good lecturer can separate what's important from what's unimportant. But only the written word can give you the details that are necessary for the thorough understanding of a subject. The details of the written word are, so to speak, the brick and mortar (added to the "superstructure") of knowledge--the meat and flesh that are added to the skeleton of the lecturer's essentials. A hallmark of professionalism is attention to details, especially the details of the written word. (Besides, studies show that successful people--CEO's and the like-- are heavy readers!)

Step 3 - Write Answers To Review Questions. The lecture contains material expressed in the words of the lecturer; the book contains material expressed in the words of its authors. With this step it is time for you to put the material into your own words. Three sets of essay-type review questions will be handed out during the course (one set about a week before each exam). Writing one- to two-paragraph answers to each of these questions, after thinking about the lecture notes and the book, will help tie many loose ends together and especially help you chew and digest the ideas. These answers to the review questions (assuming you have taken good lecture notes and have read the book) will also give you a solid set of study notes to use in preparation for the exams.

Conscientious practice of these three steps should give you in-depth knowledge and understanding. At the same time, it should keep rote memory to a minimum. It really depends on how you use your mind throughout the course.