

2007

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Recommended Citation

Doherty, Patricia (2007) "From Passivity to Interactivity: How the Traditional Lecture has Evolved as a Method of Instruction," *The ITB Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 4.

doi:10.21427/D7VB3J

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/itbj/vol8/iss1/4>

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From passivity to interactivity: how the traditional lecture has evolved as a method of instruction.

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Abstract

D’Inverno (2003:19) notes that “Most of the lectures which students attend require little engagement and they may well have developed a passive mentality in which some largely expect to switch off”. This paper reviews current thinking in this issue and present recent feedback from students in order to establish what can be done to improve the lecture as a method of instruction. We present a discussion that will help encourage a deeper sense of learning, make the lecture into something that students do not want to miss through promoting inclusiveness in learning, by making lectures more interactive and developing student participation. That is, moving from passivity to interactivity.

1. Background

A key issue for many lecturers is poor attendance at lectures. What we can do within our span of control to improve lectures regardless of class size? O’Neill (2003, p. 2) raises the important question “*How then can a lecturer create the best learning environment in the class size that they teach?*” As well as reviewing the literature, feedback on the lecture as a method of instruction was gained from students in the form of a focus group session. According to (Evaluation of Teachers and Courses for Feedback and Quality Improvement: Formative Evaluation 2006, p. 27) “*Student opinions are legitimate because they are the learners who are the sole purpose of teaching*”.

2. The Literature

2.1 The Traditional Lecture

“*The demise of the lecture method has long been predicted, yet it still remains the most widely used teaching method in higher education*” (Horgan 1999, p. 76). In fact Griffin and Cashin (cited in Robinson et al, 1997, p. 260) estimated that 75% of college courses include lectures as a method of instruction. While Ardalan (2006, p. 267) proclaims the merits of the lecture when the key objective is the transfer of knowledge;

he acknowledges that if the development of critical thinking, problem solving and other qualities such as sensitivity, cooperation and an enthusiasm for discovery are the objectives he would favour discussion pedagogy over the lecture method of instruction. Ardalan (2006, p. 267) continues by stating that the lecture as a method of instruction has many advantages. "It is efficient and economical of the time, energy, and the patience of instructor and student. It produces brilliant results. A student raised under it seems to possess a sureness, a precision, a firming of grasp remarkable for the relatively short time when he/she is compelled to spend on acquiring his/her knowledge" (Ardalan 2006, p. 267).

Horgan (1999, p. 76) suggests that many university teachers argue that the lecture is an essential part of any course and they provide valid pedagogic reasons for using this method of instruction. According to Horgan (1999, p. 76) "*Lectures are seen as necessary for providing background information and ideas, basic concepts, and methods required by students before they can learn much on their own and become effective participants in classroom discussion*".

Gilstrap & Martin, 1975 and Good & Brophy, 1990 (cited in Stephenson et al 2006, p. 1) suggest that lectures have remained popular as methods of instruction since universities were founded because of their efficiency, because they are tutor-centered and because they can easily be combined with other teaching methods. However Weingartner (cited in Solomon, 2004, p. 84) proposes a rather negative definition of the lecture "*words going from the notebook of the professor into the notebook of the student without passing through the heads of either*". He continues by suggesting that the "effect of lecturer retailing conclusions and of student passively receiving them is temporary memorizing, at best, to serve the need of some test; there will have been little learning".

Horgan (1999, p. 76) agrees that students are largely passive in traditional lectures and that rarely is there the opportunity for active learning where the student can engage with the material that is being presented. This view is shared by Goodwin (2003, p. 171) who claims that "*the lecture is not a good tool to ensure student participation*" and by O'Neill (2003, p. 2) who states that while the lecture is "*popular as an efficient way to 'teach' large numbers of students...(it) has often been criticized for lack of*

active learning and opportunity to interact with others...small group teaching has become more popular as a means of encouraging student learning". O'Neill (2003, p. 2) continues by suggesting that to move away from a large lecture format would require a complete review of the curriculum and that many lecturers are not able to do this nor do they have any choice over student numbers. Ramsden (cited in Horgan 1999, p. 78) goes as far as suggesting that *"the use of the traditional lecture may actually be detrimental to the quality of student learning, in that it leads students to expect learning to be a passive experience and does not provide them with opportunities to engage in deep processing of the subject matter"*. Barnett (cited in Solomon, 2004, p. 93) claims that the lecture *"keeps channels of communication closed, freezes hierarchy between lecturer and students and removes any responsibility on the student to respond"*.

2.2 The Interactive Lecture

According to D'Inverno (2003, p. 19) "if we are to expect students to attend lectures then there surely needs to be some "value added" other than that of providing them with a complete set of notes". D'Inverno believes that student interaction can provide some of the value added component necessary. There are many ways to make lectures more interactive. Horgan (1999, p. 83) provides at least twelve ranging from giving students a question/problem to be approached individually and then asking them to share their answers in small 'buzz groups' to turning part of the lecture into a question and answer session. According to Jensen and Davidson (1997, p. 102) lecturers must be brave enough to risk losing control. They propose that lecturers can begin by posing a question, giving students time to think about it and to talk with a partner before they respond in a whole-class discussion. Another suggestion is to rearrange the chairs into groups of three or four, and push the podium into a corner. Finally they suggest that lecturers be adventurous and move around the room joining the small discussion groups.

There are many challenges to face when planning to make lectures more interactive. Jarvis (2004, p. 161) cautions that "students may put pressure on a teacher to give a (traditional) lecture because they may not want to reveal their level of knowledge or understanding of a topic and they may feel threatened if they think that their lack of comprehension will become apparent for others to see". Horgan (1999, p. 89) proffers some advice on how to approach this change, "The best advice that can be given to

anyone contemplating a change, from a traditional lecture to a more interactive approach, is to suggest that step-by-step change works best for both students and the lecturer. If your first attempt does not work as you had planned, do not abandon the idea, but rather reflect on why this was so and try again". The approach proffered by Solomon (2004, p. 87) suggests that if students resist participating (in interactive dialogue) because they are shy or inarticulate "they are to be induced into the classroom discussion, called upon or penalized or assigned, but not overlooked". I agree that those students choosing not to participate should not be overlooked but forcing or penalising them into participation is not the ideal solution.

3. The Student Voice

A focus group session was held with 12 Business Studies students in December 2006. Some of the students were regular attendees at lectures; some had sporadic attendance and some rarely attended. The session lasted for 1 hour 30 minutes. Several areas were discussed during the session. Students were first asked to discuss what they felt the function or purpose of a lecture was. Functions of lectures provided by the students ranged from to educate and to outline important issues to covering theory. It was also stated by the students that the lecture was an efficient means to teach a large group. Interestingly the discussion kept digressing into a discussion on the tutorial which the students seemed to prefer as a method of instruction because they said they felt more comfortable in a smaller group.

The next area discussed was the strengths of the lecture as a method of instruction. This discussion was a little like getting the proverbial blood from a stone. Some of the strengths noted were that you can get through more material in the lecture, the lecturer provides examples to make you understand in the lecture and the lecture makes you disciplined. One student stated that the strength of the lecture for them was being able to see the "*facial expressions of the lecturer*".

The students were a little more forthcoming when discussing the weaknesses of the lecture as a method of instruction. The lecture "*doesn't cater for individual / different learners*", lectures can be "*intimidating*", lectures can "*get boring after a while*", and "*concentration goes*". More than one student claimed that lectures could be "too hot, with too many people". In fact Lang (cited in Fleming and Storr, 1999, p. 232)

identifies temperature, humidity and ventilation as one of the “*five categories of components of particular importance in the design of academic accommodation in order to provide an optimum learning environment*”.

The discussion then moved on with students suggesting that they would prefer a shorter lecture. Lectures are currently one hour long – the students unanimously agreed that they would attend more lectures if they were reduced to 40 minutes. A point made by one student was that the shorter lecture would “*ease the transition for first year students*” from second level into third level as such students would be used to the shorter class time.

This feedback from students confers with Horgan’s (1999, p. 78) findings on student attention levels during a 50-minute lecture. During the first 10 minutes student attention levels are highest but then as the lecture continues attention levels drop and continue to do so if students aren’t actively engaged. Horgan (1999, p. 78) continues by stating that studies on memory and retention found that students forget or never learn most of the presented material during a traditional 50-minute lecture. Students also stated that they would prefer smaller classes for the more practical subjects like mathematics and accounting.

The next topic for discussion was how to improve lectures. The first suggestion, which the majority of the group agreed with, was to make the lectures “*more interactive*”. The students felt that if the lectures were more interactive then they would respond more to the material presented. Indeed Bligh (cited in Jarvis 2004, p. 160) suggests that “*most lectures are not as effective as more active methods for the promotion of thought*”. The following methods of making lectures more interactive were volunteered by the students: pick different students to answer questions / ask questions of the class in general / split the class into teams and have quizzes / have short group discussions during lectures and have short a,b,c quizzes throughout lectures. Horgan (1999, p. 88) provides feedback from students of the University of Virginia who also like when lecturers ask questions during lectures and who were available to students after lectures. These students also welcomed any form of interactivity during lectures which required them to step away from their passive role. “The art of questioning is a technique that teachers should acquire, so that they are aware of how to gain the most effective

response from the learners”, (Jarvis 2004, p. 157). Jarvis (2004, p. 161) suggests that a major challenge of encouraging a questioning culture in lectures is that if a student then interrupts the lecturer with questions the other students may become frustrated and bored while they are being answered. Atherton (n.d. p. 1) states that questioning is the most common variation from directly presenting material and that it is the most basic method of encouraging a dialogue with students. Indeed Bruner (Constructivist Theory, n.d.) is one of the proponents of instructors and students engaging in “*active dialog*”.

The majority of the students said that they would prefer to take notes during lectures instead of having the lecture notes provided. Bligh (cited in Horgan 1999, p. 78) finds that there is “*overwhelming evidence to support the view that note-taking during a lecture aids memory of the lecture*”. Indeed Creed & Rocklin (cited in Susskind 2004, p. 203) state that “*there is a debate in the educational literature over whether non-interactive educational technology, such as accompanying lectures with PowerPoint presentations, is beneficial to students*”.

From a study carried out by the University of Lancaster which examined student perceptions of good teaching according to Ramsden (cited in Horgan 1999, p. 88) “*the most frequent descriptions of good lecturing commented on the lecturer’s ability to pitch material at the right level, to provide a clear structure and to maintain an appropriate pace*”. On discussing what makes a good lecturer the students volunteered that a good lecturer is one who “*speaks clearly*”, “*provides good notes*”, and “*makes you work*”. Most notable however was what the students’ felt as most important to them – the lecturer’s “*attitude towards students*”. The students suggested that if they felt that a lecturer respected them then they in turn respected the lecturer and were more motivated to work hard and perform for the lecturer as much as for themselves.

When asked to discuss their preferred method of instruction number one on their list was “*an interactive short lecture*”. The majority of students favour the tutorial over all other methods of instruction. Students stated that they learned best by taking notes and reading them / going home and learning their notes / writing out their notes and learning their notes by heart. The final discussion was about why students don’t attend lectures. After much deliberation the group decided on the Top 5 reasons why they felt

that they and their colleagues did/would not attend lectures:

- i) Boredom
- ii) Dislike of lecturer and/or material
- iii) Timetable issues (e.g. having 2/3 hour gaps in timetable)
- iv) Simply not caring about attendance / course
- v) Because they do not have to go i.e. there is no attendance requirement

While further work needs to be done to gain a more comprehensive understanding of student opinion, the focus group was valuable in providing an insight into how one group of students' perceive the lecture as a method of instruction.

4. Conclusion

Woodfolk (cited in Long & Coldren 2006, p. 238) states that *“effective teachers reflect on their practice to make modifications to their teaching to fit learners as necessary”* and this is what the purpose of this paper is – to establish how to improve practice. From the literature it would appear that a move from the traditional lecture where students play a passive role to a lecture that encourages student interaction, and takes into account the varying learning styles of the students, is the way forward. Indeed this view has been reinforced by feedback from the students themselves. *“The curriculum manager’s role involves assessing the learner’s learning style and incorporating such pedagogical methods such as active teaching and collaborative learning into the delivery of the subject content, so that learning is meaningful to the learner”*, (Theme 1 – Contextualisation and Introduction n.d. p. 14). *“Although lecturing has lost much of its pedagogical legitimacy, yet if it ever worked at all, if it ever had any validity, it seems reasonable to suspect that it retains some validity today”*, (Solomon, 2004, p. 89). Indeed the Dearing Report (cited in Atherton, n.d. p. 1) states that 73% of undergraduates surveyed said that they enjoyed lectures. I believe that the traditional lecture is still valid as a method of instruction today, if used sparingly. It has many benefits including its efficiency in teaching to a large group, providing background information, learning outcomes about a course, to providing students with a shared learning experience. However *“current research indicates that student-teacher interaction is one of the most important characteristics of ‘effective learning experiences’”*, (Theme 1 – New Professional Understandings, Insights and Skills n.d. p.1). The way forward I believe is to promote and encourage inclusiveness in learning by making lectures more interactive and developing student participation – moving

from passivity to interactivity.

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