Why I'm Against the Online Lecture

The venerable lecture has few allies today. Although many in the humanities have long preferred seminar-style instruction, our friends in the sciences have begun to give the lecture a second look. A growing body of research suggests that lectures simply are not that effective, especially when compared with active-learning models.

In a recent meta-analysis of some 225 studies of undergraduate STEM teaching methods, Scott Freeman, principal lecturer in biology at the University of Washington, and his colleagues found that active-learning methods both reduced failure rates and increased exam performance. But reports of the death of the lecture may be exaggerated. Several recent pieces have advocated for the lecture as a source of active learning. That might apply to some traditional college courses, but it is far from the case among massive open online courses (MOOCs) where video lectures remain ubiquitous, to the detriment of learners.

PC Magazine **Contributing Editor William Fenton is a Teaching Fellow and director of the Writing Center at Fordham University Lincoln Center.**

IN PRAISE OF THE LECTURE

I have recently read two persuasive essays arguing for the lecture, and in the humanities no less. Writing for the *New York Times*, Molly Worthen, assistant professor at UNC Chapel Hill, posits that lectures are more active than they might appear. An hour-long lecture requires students to listen carefully, discern subtle

arguments, make judgments when taking notes, and convey central points back to their professor. Lectures do not simply require a student to listen—and for longer periods than to which they might be accustomed—but to "synthesize, organize, and react."

Damon Linker, senior correspondent at *The Week*, takes Worthen's argument a step further, saying that to defend the humanities lecture is to assert that its practitioners have knowledge, that their knowledge has value, and that the lecture provides the most effective means for communicating knowledge to students. As Linker puts it, "Skipping the introductory lectures is like permitting an art student to jump straight to splatter-painting without first learning how to master the basics of figurative drawing." A democratic approach to education might assuage our egalitarian sensibilities, but it does not translate into solid instruction.

SEMINAR VALUES

As an educator and advocate for the humanities, I am sympathetic to both arguments, even if I am somewhat skeptical of Linker's last point. Most students learn through practice, and I would rather allow them that arena than impart a little more knowledge of my subject matter. The benefits are bidirectional. In taking ownership of the class, students learn to argue with one another in such a way that aligns subject knowledge with respect and deference—not just to me, but to one another. In relinquishing some control of the class, I shelve some contexts, lesson plans, and pithy quips, but in exchange I learn what students find compelling and relevant to their lives, how they think about literature and history, and how I might entice them to keep

learning. My seminar might not provide the most efficient path to impart knowledge, but if my class inculcates a habit of mind, the learning will continue after the semester ends.

Let me be clear, seminar instruction is not incompatible with the lecture. I lecture often, particularly when I want to present a context against which to read a text. But when I lecture in a physical classroom, I have access to qualitative data that informs how I conduct my lecture. If I see students taking notes, I might extend my talk. If I notice students shuffling papers, I might assign a group exercise instead. If a student asks a question and her peers are not paying attention, I might pose her question to a colleague.

The online lecture is uniquely predisposed to fail because a computer is not a notepad.

AGAINST THE ONLINE LECTURE

For all the affordances and arithmetic bounties of online education, MOOC platforms tend to be stubbornly quantitative. Outcomes, as measured in exam scores and unit completions, fail to describe students' engagement in their own learning. In fact, a course structured around completing steps and providing the correct answers will likely foster disengagement.

The online lecture is uniquely predisposed to fail because a computer is a not a notepad. Confronted with so many tools and services, students will stray from lectures. (I say this as one who has strayed from his share when testing online platforms.) No matter how impressive the production values or prodigious the instructor, the online lecture faces the intrusion of habitualized practices, such as checking Facebook, refreshing Twitter, and swiping through Instagram photos.

To make lectures "more engaging," producers of online courses embrace even shorter videos,

chunking lectures into 2- and 3-minute clips, and interweaving machine-graded quizzes and completion percentages between them. The result is less a cohesive lecture than a frenetic collection of clips that ask little of the learner other than to be present. That presence, measured by one's ability to click through a prescriptive path, evacuates both the learner's humanity and his value as an active participant to the discourse.

TOWARD AN ONLINE SEMINAR

For those committed to active learning, an online seminar might better cultivate the synthetic, organizational, and reactive traits that Worthen ascribes to the traditional lecture. A fairly recent shift toward smaller, more social, seminar-style courses would seem to align with that of Minerva's selective, carefully scripted online courses. Although Minerva students participate in conversations in much the same manner as a seminar, the educator follows a meticulously crafted script, similar to lecture notes. When students enter the class, they sign into a proprietary interface through which educators compel them to engage one another through both methods (such as relay) and home-brew technology (head-to-head debates). The result is a sort of hybrid pedagogy, in which the educator leads from behind, so to speak, intervening with lectures where necessary.

In this sense, the online seminar is not so different from the traditional seminar, which is itself well suited to the Internet. With a shared commitment to the free access to information, the value of the individual, and the desire for fluid, open-ended debate, the seminar and the Internet are philosophical kin, and I look forward to seeing them united in online education.

“The online seminar is not so different from the traditional seminar, which is itself well suited to the Internet.”