

In defence of the lecture

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, 12 – 18 January 2011

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Lecturing has fallen into disrepute. In newsletters of university teaching, at workshops, and by their peers, professors are told that lecturing to students is bad practice.

Lectures are boring, students won't remember what you've said, they won't even pay attention. Worse, not even the committed students, the ones who do pay attention, will learn much from hearing you lecture, for learning must be active while just to listen to a lecture is to remain passive.

So stand away from the lectern, and put on some slides or show a video. Or get your students to engage in creative role playing. Or divide them into small groups and assign the groups an activity. Or say something outrageous and invite your students to quarrel about it.

Into such disrepute has lecturing fallen at Saint Mary's that our overseers have purposely kept lecterns out of certain classrooms in order to discourage the practice. (Am I alone in thinking this a scandal?)

Despite its critics, lecturing is essential to university teaching. Something crucial to a student's university experience can happen while she is following a lecture, something that cannot happen in any other setting. A student who isn't regularly listening to lectures in her classes simply is not getting the education she deserves.

An education, at least an education in the liberal arts and humanities, is an education in thinking, in thinking critically. It's an education both in appreciating the critical thinking of others and in how to think critically oneself.

To think through a problem well is a demanding task, for one has to keep many different thoughts in mind at the same time, and one has to organize them into chains of argument. One has to see possible objections to one's arguments and understand why those objections fail.

The paradigm physical product of sustained critical thinking is the critical or argumentative essay. A person well educated in the liberal arts and humanities is at home with argumentative essays. She can read them with understanding and appreciation, and she can write them herself. A central goal of liberal studies is to make the student at home with critical thinking and its paradigm medium of expression.

Now certainly educated people create all sorts of things as expressions of their educated intelligence, not just argumentative essays. Academics, for instance, as part of their scholarly endeavours, create films, poems, photo essays, novels, charts, journalism, radio interviews, museum exhibits, translations, expert testimony, power-point presentations, aphorisms, dialogues, dances.... But it is only because they are at home with argumentative essays that they possess an educated intelligence they might then express in one of these other ways.

The core practical problem for the university teacher, then, is to discover how to bring her students into the world of the argumentative essay so that they, too, can feel at home there.

Reading, one might propose, is the key here. The professor must teach her students to read argumentative essays, to read them with understanding and appreciation. She must teach them to read them critically. Reading an essay critically is, of course, to begin writing an argumentative essay oneself.

That's absolutely right, reading is the key. But noting this fact simply pushes the practical problem of educating one's students back a step. Now the professor's problem is to discover how to teach her students to read.

The beginning reader faces two problems when he turns all by himself to a book or essay. The first is that the words on the page cannot themselves directly respond to his questions. The other is that the thinking that created them has effaced itself. (The words express thoughts, but they fail to express the thinking that produced those thoughts.)

This is where lecturing comes in. To give a lecture is to write an argumentative essay. It is to write it out loud, in the presence of one's students. A professor's students watch what the professor is doing, they see how it's done. They may interrupt to ask a question when what's going on puzzles them. The professor puts on display the thinking that goes into the arguments she develops so that attentive students will have an example to follow.

One scurrilous falsehood about lecturing that needs to be laid to rest is that listening to a lecture is a passive experience. It is not. To understand and appreciate a lecture requires active participation, just as reading does.

Perhaps lecturing has fallen into disrepute only because lots professors are bad at it. Perhaps lecturing suggests to professors that they read to their students. Certainly reading something to a group of students isn't going to teach them much, especially those who aren't themselves any good at reading. And so the whole endeavour will fail.

If that's right, if lecturing is associated with lecturing poorly, then the task for professors is to lecture better, not to lecture less.

Lecturing better requires that professors remember that lecturing, despite what it's called, is writing, not reading. It also entails that students attending a lecture participate in it, and don't merely let its sounds waft over them. The primary responsibility falls on the professor, of course, though nothing inspires a professor more than attentive students.