In Praise of Lecturing

In our efforts to encourage and support excellence in teaching and learning in higher education, faculty developers may appear to have little use for that venerable approach to teaching- the lecture. Anyone who has taught, however, understands the significance of lecturing as an important, even essential, arrow in their teaching quiver.

The word “lecture” derives from the Latin and Middle English word “to read”. Few instructors today would actually read pages of notes to a classroom of students for an entire class period. But many instructors do convey information through the spoken word in one-way communication, whether for ten minutes or the entire class session.

As 20th-century American education began to incorporate more active learning strategies for students, faculty members increasingly punctuated their lectures with classroom discussion, small-group work, brief writing exercises, and other activities that required students to become active learners, not merely passive listeners. Yet at certain times, and for certain purposes, lecturing remains an efficient and effective teaching method.

Among other things, lecturing can:

- Communicate the intrinsic intellectual appeal of the subject matter (much like live theater)
- In an efficient, succinct, lucid way, organize and incorporate material from other sources such as readings or experiential learning
- Convey large amounts of information, including facts and generalizations
- Summarize new material
- Communicate to many listeners simultaneously and in a more personal way than distance communication
- Enable instructors to maintain considerable control of the class material as well as interactions with students
- Present minimum threat to students who, in pure lecture context, are asked only to listen and take notes
- Model how professionals in various disciplines approach a problem and present research
- Underscore the importance of listening to the learning process, which benefits students who prefer that style of learning
On the other hand, we have all sat through classes where learning failed because lecturing was not done well. A creative instructor tries to think of innovate ways to address:

- Lack of feedback from students about what they are learning
- Student passivity, particularly in comparison to the active lecturer
- Short attention spans (the rule-of-thumb is that most people’s minds begin to wander after 20 minutes of listening to a speech)
- Limited retention of information
- The assumption that everyone learns in identical ways and at the same speed
- Unsuitability to address complex, detailed, or abstract material
- Unsuitability for making students employ so-called higher-order thinking (application, synthesis, evaluation)
- A boring speaker

The Center for Teaching has a number of resources, including succinct handouts, about the effectiveness and challenges of lecturing, lecture engagement strategies, and assessment of lecturing as a teaching tool.

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1 Of course, terminology sometimes is slow to change, and course catalogues still refer to courses that employ very little true lecturing as “lecture courses”.