

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

## Grieving the Death of the Lecture

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Upon commencing my first academic post in 2007, using Microsoft PowerPoint to deliver a lecture was the gold standard. Every single colleague in my department used a slide deck, where we delivered these in three one-hour sessions every week. ‘Good teaching’ simply referred to those who could do this well, perhaps with a few good jokes or anecdotes, and those at the other end of the spectrum merely stood behind the lectern and read directly off the slides.

Come the second decade of this millennium, best-practice in higher education teaching was increasingly synonymous with active- and student-centred learning, with terms like ‘flipped classroom’ entering the lexicon. Seminal papers in STEM education included the large meta-study of Freeman et al (2014), and more recently the Stains et al (2018) analysis of how cultural change was moving through the sector.

As an early adopter in my own Faculty, I was keen to lead the way in transforming our teaching, where I modified one general chemistry lecture per week into an interactive workshop. The following year I completely reformed an analytical chemistry module where students watched pre-recorded lectures prior to class, where instead we worked through problems and questions. Come 2018, and we have now completely transformed our general chemistry class into student-centred workshops, and other science disciplines in my institution are following suit.

But it has not always been smooth sailing, and it has been a lesson in both student and staff expectations, but more than anything an exercise in humility for myself.

Students are invariably suspicious of any change to content delivery. The perception that the instructor is no longer ‘teaching’ and that students have to ‘teach themselves’ is pervasive. Add to this that students feel as though they are the guinea pigs in some new experiment, and the challenge of getting students to buy into innovative teaching can be an uphill battle.

My colleagues thought I was crazy. Where was the evidence the flipped classroom yielded better learning outcomes? Furthermore, maybe *I* could pull it off because I was young, but for those who were trying to keep laboratories and large research groups functioning, investing large amounts of time into transforming their teaching didn’t pass the cost-benefit analysis.

But for me, the biggest challenge of all was the fact that I just *loved* lecturing. I acknowledge this is not everyone’s lived experience, but for me the exhilaration of performing for my students, and believing I was providing them with an amazing educational experience was what excited me about teaching. And my student evaluation surveys backed this up. I was one of the best lecturers around, and I was happy to make this the cornerstone of my reputation. I began to find myself seriously grieving the *death of the lecture*.

Thus I was faced with a great contradiction – the didactic lecture was comfortable furniture, and no one had an appetite for a makeover. But as an education researcher who subscribes to evidence-based practice, I knew change was essential. As a leader in my faculty, I knew I had to lead by example, coerce people to try new ideas, and nurture their attempts at changing their practice.

I am still internally conflicted by the demonization of the ‘lecture’. Everyone has been dazzled by an amazing speaker in their lives, and we routinely accept one-way oral presentations in many other forums. We invite scholars to come and present to our departments. We attend academic conferences to give and watch others deliver didactic seminars. And nothing beats a good keynote presentation from a distinguished speaker. How can it be that the lecture no longer remains relevant as a means of teaching undergraduate students?

Sustaining the cultural change we have been trying to make across the faculty has been a live experiment; however over time, I have developed three guiding principles for unit heads and faculty trainers to consider when they are transforming their classes.

Firstly, know your students. There’s no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to implementing active learning in your class. Students in their first year are transitioning to university and negotiating many new life challenges. Yes, they are open to change, but for many students it’s really hard. This might mean that the ‘lecture’ is not completely dead – there’s something comforting for students to be walked through new knowledge as they adjust to the independence required as a university student. Try to identify the right moments in the learning journey where a ‘micro-lecture’ is required. Design your model so that it weans students off the ‘sage on the stage’ model, rather than throwing them in the deep end.

Secondly, know your people. The humans in this equation are the lecturers (who in an active learning model are better referred to as instructors). For many this new learning and teaching culture is just as foreign and confronting as it can be for students. Historically, ‘lecturing’ has been an integral part of their identity. They first need to be convinced, then trained, and then they need lots of practice. Arguably our colleagues need just as soft a transition

as our students do. Student evaluations remain an important measuring tool, but be clear with your colleagues there won't be negative ramifications if the reviews are bumpy as they try new things in the classroom.

And finally, employ an open discourse about the learning culture. There are two conversations here: the continuous discussion amongst colleagues, and the one between staff and students. After all, we are all in this together working towards a common goal, but if we do not openly discuss this, are we truly sharing the same vision? As faculty, meet regularly and talk about what is working and what needs refinement. With our students, speak openly about what we are trying to achieve, and the evidence-base that supports this. These conversations will uncover what's working well, but also what isn't.

Yes, I still quietly grieve the death of the lecture, but I am also thriving with the birth of a new and exciting culture in my classroom, where students discuss problems and new concepts, laugh and have fun, and actually look forward to coming to the university.

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