

Lecturing is...

“Lecturing: it may be a word that has lost some of its relevance in education. It carries negative connotations of ‘being lectured at’ as in ‘he or she gave him or her a good lecturing’. This has, to an extent, devalued ‘lecturing’ as the best word to describe working to facilitate learning within a large group. ‘Engagement’ of the audience with both deliverer and subject is something to which all ‘lecturers’ aspire. Finding ways of getting large-group students to interact with each other, to reflect and respond to the material as it is being delivered, is a challenge. As is presenting the traditional ‘hour’s worth’ of material in a way that fits with the students’ diminishing attention span created by exposure to other forms of information presentation (TV, video games, etc).”

(UK National Teaching Fellowship winner)

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1. The stupid haranguing the stupefied.
 2. Repeating at length.
 3. Oral delivery of a written non-fiction text.
 4. Systematic oral instruction in, or exposition of, a subject.”

(A retired professor of literature in Canada)

“For me, in the context of higher education, it’s about creating a large-group learning experience. One only learns some things about Beethoven’s 8th Symphony by sitting there in the concert hall watching and listening. Less by just listening to recordings (students taping lectures, etc). More by watching and listening along with the score. Even more by talking to people who know more (or less) about it. And so on. Most, I guess by conducting it, and persuading 80 or so professional musicians about what the balance, tempo, tone, volume might be to make it work best. So conductors learn most from the process – as of course do lecturers. But lecturers don’t always become sufficiently aware of what they can be learning – and make the same mistakes next time (like some conductors).”

(A professor of educational development)

“Creating a story (with a beginning and an end, and an interesting middle) – some of which is developed by my students.”

(A lecturer in microbiology)

“An anachronistic form of teaching in which the teacher takes all the responsibility for deciding what the students are to learn, for preparing the content and for ‘delivering’ it – too frequently, badly. A magnificent learning experience for the lecturer (assuming he or she carefully attacks through what is to be taught and digests and organizes it well) and at best of doubtful value to the learner in most respects – and in many instances an insult to the intelligence of students in higher education.”

(A professor from New Zealand)

“My definitions come from a student’s perspective of what lecturing appears to be from my point of view. It should be noted that my definitions only come from a direct result of studying for many years at the University of X:

1. The attempt to explain in as much detail as possible, a subject that is either known or familiar, while at all times giving the impression that you know a great deal more.
2. The attempt to explain in as much detail as possible a subject that is unknown and unfamiliar, giving the impression that you are not acting or pretending to know, while at all times hoping that no one has any questions.
3. The attempt to explain in as much detail as time will allow a subject of great importance to participating students in a manner which keeps them awake or at least semi-conscious.
4. The relaying of highly relevant and important information, read the night before.
5. The communication of information between a person qualified to know something and those who are not.
6. The passing on of information outlined in a syllabus regardless of relevance to the subject.
7. A quick and fairly easy way for postgraduate students to make ends meet.”

(A student who recently gained a Master’s degree in computing)

“Lecturing is a traditional form of teaching with the primary objective of imparting knowledge to learners about a particular topic. In this respect it is not very effective, though it remains pretty well the ubiquitous strategy in post-secondary education for supplying learners with knowledge and is sufficiently institutionalized to be expected. Effective lecturing recognizes the limitations of this medium and augments the knowledge-supply function with learning texts (eg lecture notes and

- “Like sitting with a colander on one's head: the metal reflects information from the zones of lack of concentration and the perforations allow all manner of thought-provoking snippets through. ”
(A science teacher)
- “Actions done by overpaid, out-of-touch, arrogant, middle-class people, living in a world where only education exists. ”
(A student who dropped out of higher education)
- “The presentation of information in a didactic manner *or* death by talking head? ”
(A staff developer)
- “A means of 'munication (partly mine and partly that of Derek Rowntree). A personal dialectic. A performance, where the lecturer struts and frets and the students tut and stretch. A well-rehearsed act in which the lecturer carefully crafts an analysis of East and West and what may happen next but where, immediately afterwards, the students speak of little else but what happened last in *EastEnders*. ”
(UK National Teaching Fellowship winner)
- “Lecturing is an opportunity to air one's own knowledge of the subject in front of a (usually) attentive audience. ”
(A business studies lecturer and musician)
- “Lecturing is what parents do to young children, eg our young son recently stole £20 from my wife to buy some Pokémon cards. We lectured him subsequently on stealing! Lecturing is a one-way process whereby learning is achieved by passive listening and observing. Lecturing should have a limited place in university teaching where active and interactive learning are preferable! ”
(UK National Teaching Fellowship winner)
- “An interactive learning session, involving a human guide passing on knowledge and stimulating thinking and learning in others. ”
(Geography lecturer)

- “A talk by someone barely awake to others profoundly asleep. ”
(Lecturer in surgery)
- “Seeking to convey ideas in a way that to hearers often feels like trying to scale Everest without oxygen. ”
(A young assistant curate)
- “Being told something you don't wish to know, by someone who 'knows' better than you. ”
(A retired teacher)
- “Lecturing is the new word for teaching people too old to be treated as 'kids'. ”
(A retired schoolmaster)
- “A lot of talk to the uninterested. ”
(A retired postmaster)
- “Conveying ideas and information probably not original. Those without pens or pencils maybe absorb more than the 'scribblers'. ”
(Anon senior citizen)
- “A form of posturing in front of people anxious to maintain the illusion they are still awake. ”
(A young lecturer)

What does this tell us?

The striking thing about these responses is the frequency of strong reactions, both negative and positive. The negative definitions portray a gloomy picture of unhappy and unproductive practice where learning is often almost completely absent from the scene. Those who gave us these powerful reactions spoke with the strength of personal experience, particularly the students represented here. Where positive definitions were provided, these often came with qualifying or modifying statements referring to the purpose, process and practice of lecturing, basically arguing that lecturing can be a good learning

handouts). It focuses, instead, on those aspects of teaching that can only be delivered face-to-face: inspiring and motivating – making a subject 'come alive' and using performance skills to engage with the subject matter and explain it. 》》

(Head of a research school in health and social welfare)

“Theoretically it's about passing on information and knowledge to learners to equip them to meet the learning outcomes. In practice (my practice), it's about doing that and developing a questioning and enquiring mind, through scenario, role play, questioning the status quo, analysis and interpretation, considering bias issues, and so on. Mmmm, hadn't thought what it was I did before. 》》

(A quality manager for a professional body)

“I think it falls into a number of phases:

- identification of a need to communicate a topic or topics;
- preparation for that communication;
- delivery of the communication;
- assessment of how well the communication has been received;
- self-assessment of the delivery of the communication;
- review for the next communication.

This does not explicitly deal with the pastoral implications of lecturing but it can be argued that this fits within the phases identified, eg if communication is to be effective then the recipient must be able to receive the communication which will not be possible if he or she is under stress or there is other noise in the system. 》》

(A senior lecturer in accountancy, and senior examiner for a related professional body)

“Lecturing is engaging with a large number of people simultaneously to convey such things as information, enthusiasm, knowledge and to generate interest among the audience and participation if you are lucky. 》》

(An educational developer, experienced in the built environment field)

“Lecturing is a situation and an activity. It can be good or bad:

- **Bad situation:** what passes from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either.

- **Good situation:** a mature mind engaging with a large number of maturing minds facing each other in one place.

- **Bad activity:** casting artificial pearls before real swine.
- **Good activity:** it all depends – on purpose, content, discipline, maturity of audience, degree of interactivity, etc, etc – and that is before one has decided whether a political speech (Pericles' funeral oration), a sermon (Jesus on the Mount), a rabble-rouser (Demosthenes' Philippicas) are 'lectures'. 》》

(Senior heroic educational developer and guru)

“Any number of students learning with the teacher at the centre. The teacher sets out the journey, the steps and (largely) the pace, however interactive it becomes. Also, the teacher is seen as the main source of knowledge, wisdom and balance in the session (the teacher has the big picture). I suppose for me, the main point of the lecture (at Level 1) has always been to help students develop this big picture, to be a focus for the contextualizing of all the detail, a framework in which to build the understanding. I suspect that by Level 3, we should be challenging things a lot more, almost using the lecture to help students develop the confidence to deconstruct the framework and build their own... This is probably very variable with subject discipline. 》》

(Educational developer/lecturer)

“Someone talking and a lot of people listening. 》》

(A pre-university learner)

“Rather late on in my career I decided to act on the well-known research evidence about the concentration span of student in lectures and decided never again to give a 50-minute lecture without breaking it up with at least two activities. The challenge over the last dozen or so years has been to devise a range of exercises which engage the students actively and meaningfully in their learning. The term 'lecture' needs to be deconstructed, as the experience of students will vary both within and between lectures. At its most basic it is probably useful to distinguish between 'formal' and 'interactive' lectures, where the distinction is based on the extent to which the students are passively/actively involved in the event. 》》

(UK National Teaching Fellowship winner)