Organizing an Effective Lecture: Elective Seminar

Seminar Description

Lecturing remains a popular method of communicating information in the classroom. This seminar will offer strategies for crafting engaging, meaningful lectures for your students. Furthermore, it will consider audience concerns to take into account when preparing lectures for your classes.

Seminar Objectives

- Understand critical elements of an effective lecture
- Learn strategies for crafting sessions that are both informative and encourage student participation.
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Lecturing Fundamentals – Considering Your Audience

Lecturing is particularly suited to delivering substantial amounts of factual information, demonstrating processes, and teaching large classes whose size makes broad-based discussion impractical. However, lecturing is often criticized as a sure way to bore students or as one-sided or unimaginative. This point of view can be true, but not because lecturing is inherently dull. It may be that the lecturer has failed to account for the needs of the listening audience.

**How might attention span influence your lecture?**

People have fairly short attention spans; some estimates suggest that students can listen to a speaker for only about seven to ten minutes before their attention starts to wander. Thus, instead of going at full tilt for forty-five minutes, you should divide your lecture into segments which allow a shift of focus regularly enough to recapture student attention. Also, students can only absorb a limited amount of new material in any given class session. If your lecture is jam-packed with new content, most of the information will sail right by your students.

**Are you lecturing when students should be doing?**

Lecturing is not always an effective way to teach critical thinking, analysis, or problem solving; these are skills that students must practice. In a lecture-oriented class, build in active learning components to get students working, and integrate these smoothly into the format of the lecture. For example, a lecture on mathematical theories can be supplemented with brief problems students must solve in groups by applying those theories.

**Are you using visual aids effectively?**

Many students retain information better when they both hear and see it. Diagrams on chalkboards, clear transparencies with an outline of the topic and main ideas, demonstrations with physical props, and even handouts can be useful. Stopping to write on the board or to discuss a PowerPoint slide gives students a moment to catch up, and these visual points serve as an anchor for developing an outline of important course content. Be certain you employ these visual aids to assist students in understanding new material, rather than cramming more information into one class period. If you distribute copies of your presentation, encourage students to take notes on your packet of information, and provide space for them to write notes. Asking students to annotate your material helps them to be active rather than passive listeners.
How does your lecture “fit” into your course?

Make it clear to your students how your lecture is related to previous and future class sessions. The connections may be intuitively obvious to you but not to students. Remind students of underlying principles presented in earlier lectures. Point out that the information learned today will be the foundation for class sessions in weeks to come. The more you can reinforce how daily material fits into the larger structure of your course, the more likely students are to understand and expand on those connections.

Writing lectures vs. using notes – what works best?

Some instructors write out the whole lecture word-for-word; some only note key points and go on spontaneously. Some reach a compromise, drafting a full lecture and then condensing it into notes or note cards for the actual delivery. Whichever technique you choose, make sure that it feels comfortable to you. However, using a complete script rather than an outline may cause you to look more at your notes than your class. It may be more important to rehearse your delivery style than the actual material; practice making frequent eye contact with students, speaking clearly and audibly, and sustaining a pace neither too fast nor too slow. If you are afraid of running out of time, include time guide posts for when you should begin specific segments of your lecture.

What about humor?

Use humor to liven up your delivery. Consider interjecting anecdotes about the topic at hand or pointing out the absurdities or ironies in your subject. Laughter will you’re your students (and you) relax, which can lead to greater interest and attentiveness. By pointing out what is funny about your discipline, you may even inspire students who were initially intimidated by your field to pursue further studies in the subject. Just make sure that our humor is relevant, appropriate, and suited to your own style.

How are students responding?

Lecturing can be one-sided if the lecturer is unaware of student responses. Build in ways to solicit students’ answers or questions; this approach is a good way to find out how well students are processing the material and to make any necessary changes to draw them in or to clarify your points. Pay attention to student responses as you speak; their faces and body language will reveal if you are going too fast or if you are confusing or boring them.

Should students takenotes?

If you feel students would benefit from taking notes in class, consider providing an outline to help them see the overall structure of the lecture. You can provide this outline
prior to class, as a class handout, or as something written on the board. Repeat more difficult material in an interesting manner to make sure that students both captured this particular information in their notes and understand it.

Students are sometimes frustrated when they are required to write notes for the entire class. They are especially upset if the lecturer uses lots of PowerPoint slides without making the slides available online. Students spend the entire class furiously trying to keep up without having time to think about the content and/or to see how ideas are organized and connected.

Organizing Your Lecture

Every lecture should have a clear and distinct structure that students can follow without difficulty. As an instructor, you may want to give your students handouts or write outlines on the chalkboard to which students can refer as you proceed. The following list outlines one approach to crafting lectures:

- Start with an introduction to the topic, explaining what points will be covered.
- Proceed to the main section, including relevant examples to reinforce key points. Use more than one example to make sure that all students understand a concept. Also ask your students to consider connections between various examples.
- Wrap up with a distinct conclusion, restating the important themes and information in an informed context.

As the above list shows, lectures have beginnings, middles, and ends. The next section of this document elucidates this structure, outlining the different goals that you should try to meet with each part of your lecture.

The beginning of a lecture

First of all, try to gain students’ attention and motivate them to learn. PowerPoint can be used very effectively to this end. In an effort to bring students into the sphere of your topic, consider using images, music, and/or video clips to draw students’ attention or stimulate discussion.

Secondly, an important goal of the beginning of a lecture is to tell students what they will learn in the day’s session by stating the objectives for the day. Presentation technology allows faculty and TA’s to easily enumerate main points and student expectations.

Consider starting a session with an opening question posed on the board or on a PowerPoint slide. Students can respond to this question in a several ways: they can write their answer(s), simply think quietly, or participate in a “think-pair-share” activity (students think for a few moments about the question, pair up with a partner to discuss the question briefly, and
then come back to share their thoughts with the larger group). Posing an opening question helps to assess students’ knowledge of the particular topic and might help you shift the focus of the lecture to what students actually need.

**The meat of the lecture**

The meat, or mid-point, of the lecture is where you present the main content. It is helpful to pause every twelve or fifteen minutes for students to process the information actively. Research has shown that people cannot attend to lectures for longer than about twelve or fifteen minutes. If the lecture is longer, students begin to lose focus and their minds will wander. It is in these lulls that students should be engaged in some kind of active learning activity.

Many instructors are reluctant to try active learning strategies during a lecture for a variety of reasons. Some do not think active learning strategies can work in large classes, but this in fact is not the case. Active learning strategies do not need to be difficult to manage, nor must they take a lot of time. They can be one- or two-minute activities, done alone or in pairs, that break up a lecture at twelve or fifteen minute intervals. The strategies discussed below can be adapted nicely to this particular timeline:

- Ask students to turn to a neighbor and come up with a question related to the lecture topic that they feel is difficult. They should try to stump their partner. Faculty and TA’s can then collect these cards and respond to them in class that day or weave the answers into the next lecture. This strategy gives students a greater investment in the course content and what they produce.
- Facilitate a “note check” during the mid-point of a lecture. Ask students to find a partner and compare notes, identifying the most important points of the preceding content are and noting ideas that they find unclear.

**Wrapping it up**

At the end of your lecture, summarize your main ideas and challenge students to connect the information to themselves, their own values, and its application to the world. To conclude your lecture effectively, try using the following techniques:

- Ask students to write about what the most difficult point of the lecture or their final questions about the material. In this way, students are encouraged to process the material and communicate with you about it.
- Invite students to answer two or three brief questions pertaining to the material you covered. This strategy is called a classroom assessment technique. In a sense, what you are doing is asking students if they understood what you consider to be the most important parts of the day’s material. Collecting your students’ answers in writing or asking them to respond verbally will help you assess whether or not you have met your
teaching goals. If the responses suggest that you have not met your goals, you can cover some of the material at the start of the next day’s lecture or create assignments that will help students process it. While this technique aids in assessment, it also demonstrates to your students that you genuinely care about their learning and that they are achieving what they set out to by enrolling in your course.

Additional Resources

Print


Electronic
