

Teaching Without Lectures: A Journey

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I first gave up lecturing about the time my 1992 book came out (*Contested Frontiers in Amazonia*, co-authored with Charles H. Wood). With all my brilliant lecture notes neatly offered up in such an accessible package, what was the point?

Right about the same time, I started working with people who specialized in teaching adults in non-academic short courses overseas, and I learned about something called "experiential learning." The idea that students' experience should be the starting point of a learning process was totally at odds with my own memories of lecture-dominated classrooms that produced reams of outlines and notes to be studied for tests.

Immersion in teaching mixed groups with multiple instructors from different fields, genders, countries, and even languages gave me an appreciation of how to use diversity to benefit classroom learning, and the confidence to throw out the lecture playbook and start over. When I mentioned to a colleague that I was thinking of abandoning lecturing as my main teaching strategy, he commented that he would love to do that, but he couldn't because he simply "had to get through the material." This started me wondering what other ways there might be besides lectures to convey the "material" in my classes.

What was the essence of that material, anyway? As I get older, I find I'm more interested in the questions than in the answers. As a social scientist, I know that the essence of what I teach is not the detailed histories and insightful analysis contained in finished publications....but rather the pathways I took to comprehend them. How could I rethink my classes to lead the students down these pathways themselves?

Interested in learning more about how people learn, I read enough about personality and learning styles to understand that many people learn more easily using visual, practical, or hands-on techniques than passively listening (even if followed by question-and-answer periods). I started actively collecting visual and practical exercises that I could use in a classroom in lieu of lectures.

How to translate from the dynamic field training course environment to the college classroom? The experiential learning community suggested a process that started with EXPERIENCE and proceeded to CONCEPTS and thence to APPLICATION, followed by REFLECTION. I began to experiment with ways to adapt this process to guide students to those thinking pathways that led to good analysis, the core "material" of my classes.

I began to think of the course readings and other materials presented in class (videos, brief conceptual lectures, brainstorming discussions) as the initial collective "experience" that provided the point of departure for learning. A short video about a micro-credit program in Central America, for example, provoked great discussions about gender, poverty, empowerment, and capitalism.

Rather than merely discussing expert texts in great detail, I asked students to apply the core concepts to some task -- such as comparisons, in small groups, of factors that lead to deforestation in different parts of the world. Small groups (about 3 people) allow everyone to participate, no matter how reticent; I circulate among groups, and then we spend time reflecting on what was learned. In the discussion, I make sure my main points get across, but usually the important issues emerge spontaneously, as part of the students' own intellectual discovery.

One group panel produced a multi-dimensional "mobile" that vividly demonstrated the different layers and dynamics of economic development -- a device I have translated into a travel edition in different languages.

To make this work, I actually have to set a different classroom tone. In my graduate classes, on the first day the students talk in groups about course objectives and this allows me to make final adjustments to the course. .

Students sometimes complain that they would like more lectures in my classes. They think I know the answers. But I know that they are the ones who keep the questions fresh.