

Harry Potter and the Ghost Teacher: Resurrecting the Lost Art of Lecturing

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A SIGNIFICANT IMAGE of classroom lectures is the one presented in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. At Harry's Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the most torturous class is easily History of Magic, which is, incidentally, the only class in the school taught by a ghost. Being taught by a ghost could be quite exciting: not so in History of Magic. The professor lectures, inducing in his students a coma-like state and alienating them entirely from what could be not only interesting but also intensely relevant subject matter. In the fifth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, one recently translated to the big screen, Rowling describes the history teacher this way:

Professor Binns, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, droning voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weather. He never varied the form of their lessons, but lectured them without pausing while they took notes, or rather, gazed sleepily into space.¹

This is apparently what it means to lecture and to be lectured to: stultifying boredom, teachers who love to hear themselves talk, and students who are entirely passive (if even conscious).

Like the fictional Professor Binns, lectures are dead. This is what we're told anyway, in articles, in workshops, in the department office while standing around the coffee pot. Historians have been some of the last in the education profession to internalize this message, but we're still getting it loud

and clear. If you want students to engage with the subject you're teaching, if you want to avoid the disappointment of looking around at a room of softly snoring young adults while you explain the causes of the Thirty Years' War, if you want to be a fully actualized teacher, give up lecturing.

Instead, we are counseled to use exclusively so-called "active" learning strategies: small group activities, discussions, projects, and student presentations. This is where the real teaching and learning occur, we're told. Perhaps if you're unfortunate enough to teach classes with an excess of 200 students, you may reconcile yourself to lecturing, but otherwise it's not only an outdated mode of instruction, but downright irresponsible. Lecturing to classes of twenty-five or fewer has become shameful.

But I would like to suggest that we don't have to throw lectures onto the cart that carries away the dead, and that, indeed, lectures just might be calling out to us that they're not quite dead yet. If we take a look at some of the symptoms of disease we see in lecturing, perhaps we can diagnose the problem. Then we can look for a cure without having to euthanize the patient in sheer weariness that it has lingered beyond its era of fashionability.

Reasons to Violate the "Do Not Resuscitate" Order

You might ask, "Why should we bother reviving the art of lecturing? Why not forget lecturing and concentrate on discussions, presentations, small group projects, and the like?" Because listening to someone speak for an hour or so and then being able to remember the salient points is a valuable life skill, regardless of your field. Our students will go on to jobs where they almost certainly will be required to sit in meetings listening to their bosses or colleagues talk about important matters. There may be no opportunity for discussion; there may be no chance to brainstorm or work out concepts in small groups. In addition, the non-interactive speech is a primary way that our democratic society conveys information and ideas vital to national, social, and political interests. The President's State of the Union Address is one obvious example. In an era in which citizens are bombarded with speech of various kinds, the ability to listen well and critically analyze what they are hearing is crucial for the well-being of our society. When we avoid lecturing, denying students the chance to hone their listening skills, we fail to prepare them for the realities of their future work and their future lives.

From the teacher's point of view, lectures provide a practical format for conveying information and ideas. Lectures can educate in a straightforward manner that helps to move students clearly and efficiently through the great quantities of material involved in history and other disciplines.

When students feel bombarded by information or overwhelmed by difficult concepts, lectures can help them recognize and understand the most important points, clearing a pathway through such potential obstacles to learning. When students are presented with difficult materials to interpret, lectures can provide a context to help them generate interpretations that are both creative and productive, both innovative and based on a foundation of knowledge. Especially in the field of history, which is a narrative discipline, the art of storytelling is central to what we do.

More than these pragmatic benefits, however, lecturing to students can be a teacher's most generous act. When we lecture, we share with students our understanding of a subject we have mastered, a subject that inspires us and stirs our passions. Our society values egalitarianism, and so sometimes we as teachers feel uncomfortable with the fact that we know more than our students. But this is precisely why we are teachers. Students want our guidance, our wisdom, and our experience. Our profession demands of us that we share our insights and expertise with students, and lectures can provide an ideal format for this generous, self-revealing process without turning towards indoctrination. Lectures can be, and should be, vibrant, stimulating, and informative. They can generate interest and enthusiasm for a subject by conveying the professor's love for it. They can welcome students into a discipline, topic, or problem and give students a foundation from which to build their own ideas and interpretations.

It is true that lectures do not always successfully accomplish these aims. No teaching method is perfect, though. Class discussions sometimes become an opportunity for students to pool their ignorance and reinforce unfounded ideas. Excessive use of computer technologies can limit students' ability to interact with people without the buffer of technology and can also produce passivity. Student presentations can be inaccurate and superficial. Each of these techniques can also be used to cover for a teacher's lack of preparation for class. But this is not to say that these different modes of teaching are educationally unsound. Used well and in combination with other teaching methods, these strategies for learning can accomplish what they set out to do. Likewise, the problems people associate with lectures are neither insurmountable nor endemic to the form of the lecture itself. Many professors are, frankly, never taught the principles and practices of good lecturing, and so it is no wonder that they do not always do it effectively.

Diagnosing and Treating the Illness

One of the most common problems associated with lectures is the complaint that Harry Potter had about History of Magic: the lectures were

profoundly dull. But lectures can, in fact, be very interesting if the lecturer has a concern for her or his audience. The use of humor goes a long way toward keeping lectures lively and helps to vary the tone of the lecture so that the instructor doesn't drone on like the fictional Professor Binns. Humor also creates a sense of interchange between teacher and students that helps pave the way for more substantive interactions. Ken Bain, in his book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, talks about using "warm language" to make the spoken word dramatic and personal.² Then, too, adding audiovisual materials can help keep students interested in what is being said.

But the boredom complaint is, at base, rather superficial and easily remedied. The most important objection we need to reexamine is the oft-mentioned truism that lectures make students into passive receptacles for the wisdom of the teacher. There are several critiques bound up in this statement: that listening to a lecture is passive, that the "sage on the stage" has a fixed position on all relevant issues, and that lectures alienate students from teachers and from the subject being taught. None of these is necessarily the case.

The criticism goes something like this: Lectures do all the thinking for the students and don't provide them with a way to engage with the material. When a lecturer begins speaking, so they say, students turn off their brains with relief or resentment that they won't be using them for the next 50 minutes. Certainly, this sometimes happens. Part of the problem is that we've told students to expect this occurrence; beliefs about the educational irresponsibility of lecturing have filtered down to students, who are told that lecturing is old-fashioned and probably unsuited to their individual style of learning. I have known of students who dropped classes because of a predominantly lecture format, saying, "I can't learn from lectures." This is ridiculous, tantamount to saying, "I can't learn from reading books." We shouldn't encourage this misperception because it inhibits the educational growth of our students, even beyond the classroom. Why bother attending a public lecture or a political speech, for example, if you are convinced you could never learn anything from the experience?

The truth is that listening is not passive. It is not easy to listen well, to think about what one is listening to, and to remember what one has heard, which is probably why some students think they cannot do it. We need to stress to students that they have to think about listening as the active process that it really is. We need to help them develop strategies to keep their brains turned on during a lecture.

Note-taking is one of those strategies, one that some students (and teachers) think they do not need. One attitude seems to be that a good teacher makes such an impression on students that they will simply re-

member everything—the bit of knowledge or wisdom they have found will be indelibly stamped on their souls, with no need for reminding or reinforcing. Not only is this an unrealistic expectation, but this attitude fails to acknowledge that all of us in our daily lives sometimes need to remember facts, questions, ideas, that are not earth-shattering or that are too complex to be recalled automatically.

In the absence of the indelible stamp on our souls, note-taking is a very useful skill to have. It helps us process and organize what we hear. Good note-takers do not merely scramble to record everything they have heard; on the contrary, they think about what they hear, determine its essential meaning, importance, and relation to other issues, and distill it in a form that they will recognize and understand at a later time. This takes practice, of course. Good note-takers are actively involved in creatively organizing and interpreting the information they have heard. Thus the mere process of note-taking helps students to transform their time in lecture into an active, though highly individualized experience. This process allows students to engage with the material of the course in a uniquely personal way.

Students can also become more active listeners by generating questions while taking notes, either for clarification by the instructor or for their own speculation. If they are shy about voicing these questions in class, they can form study groups outside of class to review the main points of the lecture and to address the questions they have formulated. By talking with other students outside of class, students can not only reinforce what they've gleaned from the class lecture, but also potentially challenge existing evaluations. However, such a challenge, were it not founded on a base of knowledge (the lecture), would have little value.

For our part, professors can facilitate students' active approach to lectures by not adhering too rigidly to the form. One key mistake many lecturers make is to cut off sources of spontaneous discussion during class. Instead, they should encourage student involvement in the lecture by creating an atmosphere in which questions are welcomed and even used as a spring-board for the development of more advanced or nuanced concepts. One way to create a sense of dialogue between teacher and students—even within a straightforward lecture—is for the lecturer to ask questions periodically, some specific, some more open-ended. A technique I have used is to start the lecture with a key question, and at the end of the lecture (or the beginning of the next) invite students to answer the question based on what they've heard. This need not take long, and it simultaneously conveys to students the ultimate purpose of the lecture and reminds them of their active role—listening, understanding, answering—during the lecture.

My point here is not to provide a “how to” for lecturing. Rather, I want

to suggest that many professors who lecture do so in a way that is not boring, does not alienate students or deny them their voice, and does not turn them into passive automatons who only regurgitate the thoughts of the professor. There are many creative, innovative, even “student-centered” professors who use lecturing as a central component of their teaching. If we as teachers become more thoughtful about the way we lecture, and if we help students understand and value their critical role in the lecture-based class, we can successfully revive the lecture as a teaching tool.

Alive and Kicking

We need not get rid of lectures entirely to make our classes responsive to students’ educational needs. Lectures serve an important purpose, and they can also be integrated very successfully with other modes of instruction. Lectures can lift discussions to a higher level, ensure more productivity in small group exercises, and encourage more sophisticated and knowledgeable debates about the material. We do lectures a disservice when we label them unimaginative, arrogant, and unresponsive. But more important, we do students a disservice when we fail to teach them listening skills and fail to give them the opportunity to practice them.

In the *Harry Potter* books, Hermione Granger is one of the few students to possess these skills and is thus resistant to the “soporific power” of Binns’s lectures.³ This means that Harry and his friend Ron constantly borrow her notes for class. It also means that when, in *The Order of the Phoenix*, the malevolent Professor Umbridge gives her opening speech to the school, using veiled language to reveal her nefarious plans to undermine the school’s values, Hermione is the only one who truly hears her. While the other students grow restless and glassy-eyed, Hermione is “drinking in every word” of their new teacher’s lecture.⁴ At the end of it, when Ron complains that it was “about the dullest speech I’ve ever heard,” Hermione tells him and Harry, “it explained a lot.”

“Did it?” said Harry in surprise. “Sounded like a load of waffle to me.”

“There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle,” said Hermione grimly.⁵

Hermione is forewarned about the danger Umbridge represents because she knows how to listen, how to sort through what people say to hear what they mean, how to determine the important aspects of a lecture or a speech. In the sixth and seventh books, once Voldemort returns and begins assembling his army among magical creatures, knowledge of History of Magic becomes vital, too. As the good wizards and witches try to win centaurs, goblins, giants, and even house-elves to their cause, and as Harry

and Voldemort battle for supremacy over the ancient school of Hogwarts, understanding past relationships, political struggles, and ideological differences becomes necessary for defeating evil. Ghostly Professor Binns's boring lectures notwithstanding, the information he communicates is valuable for all who know how to listen.

Everyone, even those of us in the "muggle" world, ought to have these skills, because they're not only useful and practical, but essential for listening critically to the messages we hear in our daily lives. We owe it to our students not to abandon lecturing because of a few bad stereotypes. We owe it to them to teach them that listening is an active process that they can and should master. We owe it to them to embrace the lecture as a vital, engaging, and necessary form of communication and education—in short, to prove by example that the rumors of the lecture's death have been greatly exaggerated.

Notes

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003), 228-229.
2. Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
3. Rowling, 229.
4. *Ibid.*, 213.
5. *Ibid.*, 214.

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