

Lecturing: Using a Much Maligned Method of Teaching

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It is often said that lecturing is a poor teaching method, a kind of last resort for instruction. Many lecturers, in fact, do not know how to impart information or stimulate interest effectively; consequently, their lectures are often poorly presented, badly organized, dull, and uninspiring. Even when the lectures are finely presented and well organized, and the lecturer magnificently charismatic, many educators will continue to argue that the method is still a poor second best because lecturing tends to keep students passive. After all, the argument continues, isn't the whole aim of teaching to make students think, which requires personal activity on their part? This argument often concludes with a question, Was Socrates a lecturer?

In some senses, then, this argument is as much in favor of seminars, tutorials, and similar discussion-oriented forms of teaching as it is against lectures. I happen to believe that these criticisms of the lecture method are misleading, and so I want to begin by giving some arguments in favor of the lecture—starting with Socrates. To begin with, I don't think that Socrates is the best possible argument to use against the lecture method. He didn't, for example, come to the best of all possible ends, he never published, and, most important, he really had rather few students—and very unusual ones at that. Now, if I had fewer than a dozen students, one of whom was Plato and the other was Alcibiades, I don't think I'd lecture either. Unfortunately, neither of them has seen fit thus far to enroll in my introductory psychology course.

My point is that Socrates may not be the best model to use when considering various teaching methods because his was not the situation that we face. In this country, professors have to teach vast numbers of students. The last time I looked at the data, some fifty percent of American high school graduates enroll as freshmen in some college. Now, how can we manage to teach that massive number of people in seminars? There simply are not enough professors or teaching assistants to go around.

In addition, there are some subjects—and psychology is assuredly one of them—in which a base has to be built and introductions performed. One has to start somewhere, and, for that kind of subject, a lecture may be just fine. There will be plenty of time later on for seminars in which the deep questions and fine points are discussed. But, for heaven's sakes, I don't want to have an introductory student in psychology debate with me the anatomy of the brain or certain methods of how to measure learning in a rat. It's absurd! They simply don't know enough at this point. Later on, those things are perfectly fine to discuss but not in the introductory sequences.

When your objective is to communicate some basic facts, some basic terminology, or some initial understanding about your field the lecture can be a very useful teaching method. The trick, of course, is to do it well. Therefore, what I want to do today is to tell you how I have tried to do it. However, I should preface all the comments that follow by saying that deep down I believe teaching is an exceedingly personal business. What works for me may not work for you. Nevertheless, I'll tell you how I've done it, in my field with my assets and limitations, and hope that you can draw some useful generalizations.

How to begin? During my academic career, I have tried to introduce my field, psychology, to my students. I've taught the same course in lecture form for a long time. In order to explain why I still teach this course—and still enjoy doing it after all these years—I should probably begin with a bit of biography. When I was a second-year assistant professor at Swarthmore College, whoever had taught introductory psychology previously had left or gone on leave or something. So one of my very, very honorable colleagues said, "Let Gleitman teach. He has a big voice"—what he really meant is he has a big mouth—"loves to talk, and thinks he is an actor, so maybe he'll keep the students awake." What he didn't say was, "And, if he does it, I won't have to."

I thought it would be perfectly easy, and then I had to give my first lecture. I was terrified. There were 150 students in the front of me. It was a sea of faces; they were looking at me. I looked at them; they looked back. I looked at them, and I didn't know how to begin. I began that first lecture with what I call the confused beginning. In my confused beginning, I began by saying, "Psychology is the study of behavior." After making this statement, I paused, they looked at me, and the atmosphere got hostile. So I smiled boyishly—at least I thought I smiled boyishly—and I added, "And of consciousness." The atmosphere became even more hostile.

Since that time I've decided that one of the hardest things in lecturing, at least in introducing psychology, is knowing how to begin. Overtime, I've tried a whole catalogue of beginnings. For example, I once tried what I call the no-nonsense beginning, which goes something like this: I walk in, drop my books on the table, and say, "Psychology is a science." Then, I looked at them defiantly—no smile. Bizarrely enough, it works. Actually, if you are sure enough of yourself and in what you're saying, anything works. There is, however, one beginning that I have thought about but have never had the courage actually to use. It's my historical beginning; it basically goes like this: "In 1879, Wilhelm Wundt (the father of psychology) said, 'let there be psychology and behold there was darkness.'" Maybe, just before I retire, I'll use it.

Over the years, I have finally settled on what I call the bureaucratic beginning, which I believe is my greatest contribution to the theory and practice of teaching the introductory course. The bureaucratic beginning goes as follows: "The name of this course is Introductory Psychology. My name is Henry Gleitman. There will be two midterms and a final." I have settled on this. I think it is a marvelous beginning. I've memorized it. I can even recite the bureaucratic beginning in my sleep. It gives me something to say, so that I can get over my initial nervousness. And, believe me, that is real. Every time I begin teaching introductory psychology, the first day of class I have stage fright. All kinds of things happen to me digestively, the details of which do not belong in this lecture. I'm unhappy. Maybe they won't like me. Worse, maybe they'll be right. The bureaucratic beginning is like aspirin. It helps, and it works.

What should follow? Once you've settled on a beginning, then what? You now have to ask yourself many questions. For example, I begin with such minor questions as, What is psychology about? and How do I tell my students about it? My attempts to answer these questions in a way are not unrelated to my own personal characteristics, which will always be the case, but it took me a long time to realize there was a different question I had to answer first - Who is the audience?

I'll begin my discussion of this point, by telling you about my discovery of who the audience is not. When I first began teaching, I addressed an imaginary audience made up of my professors in graduate school or, a little later, all my distinguished colleagues. The purpose of the lectures I delivered to this imaginary audience was to show them how smart and clever I am, and how I could win any argument by confounding any opposition. I apologize to my introductory psychology students of now forty years ago; it was a dreadful thing to do. Basically, I was just giving myself an intelligence test in public, and, in that respect, I failed these students. Obviously, none of the people I was addressing—in my case, Edward Chase Toulmin, for example—was in the audience.

I also discovered later still, that the audience that you imagine should not be, or at least not exclusively be, the students who go on to take further courses. Of course, I do try to teach those students, but I'm really more interested in that group, a larger group, that does not go on. If you teach only those who go on or worse perhaps that subset that goes on to graduate school, becomes professors of psychology, and then teaches introductory psychology, you become locked into an incestuous kind of circle. I don't think it makes any sense because there are so many more of the others. In my institution from fifty to sixty percent of the students in introductory psychology never take another course in the field. God must have loved introductory psychology students, since he made so many of them.

In virtually any subject, the majority of your students will not become majors, and an even larger majority of them will never go to graduate school. Nevertheless, I once treated the vast majority of my students as kind of academic cannon fodder, which I now regard as wrong. I believe that my real job is to teach those students who are sitting in my classroom—that is, whoever the administration in its infinite wisdom chooses to put there in front of me.

Put simply, my job is to educate them, all those students who sit in front of me—but educate them to do what? In theory at least, I should educate them in such a way so that it can be said that their training is in the liberal arts. To accomplish this goal, I first show them—both those who go on and those who don't—that psychology is a worthy member of those disciplines that we call liberal arts. I want students to see something about psychology that makes it worthy to be taught in an intellectual university. Therefore, I try to teach it so that it becomes relevant to the artistic and intellectual achievements that are part of our human, perhaps Western, heritage.

If I can accomplish this simple but lofty goal, it will be valuable for students who do not go on. It will also be valuable for those who do go on because they will then see the field as part of a broader cultural enterprise, an enterprise that ultimately includes chemistry, English literature, and, for all I know, Gregorian chants. Eventually, some narrowing of interests will be necessary if they plan to go on in the field, but I would hope not before they have learned to see psychology in relation to other disciplines.

Thus far, what I have been stressing are things one should not do with regard to your audience is. Now, I'd like to address the question, What things should you not do with regard to your subject? I believe, when teaching an introductory course, one should not concentrate on what is backstage. In any discipline, there are lots and lots of stuff backstage. And most of the time an

audience does not want to know, unless they are professionals themselves, how the revolving stage works or exactly what the actor did in order to convey a particular impression.

In my discipline what are backstage are questions of methodology. As a professional, I have to know the methodological foundations of my field to work effectively, but, in teaching introductory psychology, it pays not to overemphasize the methods. It pays not to worry about them, but only bring them up when you need them. Obviously, if you start talking about intelligence and start talking about the question, Is intelligence inherited partially? which leads to the explosive topic of whether there are racial group differences, then you have to talk about methodology. If you don't want to talk about methodology, then perhaps it is better not talk about potentially explosive topics at all.

However, it is through discussing such loaded topics that the student becomes motivated to understand what the methods are by which such questions can be examined. In other words, a controversial topic can be useful sometimes, but don't begin with such topics, and, for God's sake, don't talk about whether your field is a science! If you happen to be a physicist and a chemist, it is boring to even mention. However, there are a couple of disciplines—psychology is one of them—in which you can argue about whether it is a science. Argue with your colleagues if you must, but keep this business of psychology as the science of behavior, with which I began my first lecture, out of your lectures in introductory courses.

Another thing I've learned during my career as a teacher is that you should not emphasize what you know. That's what I did in the beginning. I set up the course so I could carefully describe such and such a theory and then proceeded to tear that theory apart. For example, in keeping with the intellectual heritage of psychology, I once began a class by explaining response psychology and behaviorism; I built it up and made them learn the ins and outs. Then we had a full week in which I showed them that this magnificent edifice that they had just worked so hard to acquire was all nonsense. I totally demoralized them in the process.

Thus far, I have paid a lot of attention to the things you should not do. But, what should you do with regard to your subject? I would be remiss if I did not talk about helping your students create links between the facts they learning. For example, I hope that by the time they are through with my course my students will know about Pavlov, a little something about language, the eye, and the ear. I spend my real time and effort helping them to create links so that these little items, these items of facts, don't float unconnected, in some kind of educational sea, each by itself.

For example, I try to make them see that the connections between the sensory experiences, which come through the eye, perception, memory, thinking, language, all belong to one overarching set of topics that might be called knowledge or mind as knower. While the particulars of the theories in each of these areas might be different—that is, the mechanisms to explain one would not be the same as to explain others—they all still serve a single framework. Further, I want them to realize that there are some basic questions that run through every one of these subtopics—for example, Is it learned?

Moreover, not only do I try to show them about the links within the subject, but I spend a lot of time trying to show them how to create links to information outside the field. My hope in doing

so is to avoid that silliness of students who assume every course should be taken as an isolated island, which is disconnected from all the other isolated islands they have taken. Obviously, I can only create links in terms of my knowledge and experience, but I try. For example, I sometimes try to relate questions in visual perception, which after all is nothing but patches on the retina, to visual problems that the Renaissance painters confronted as they desperately tried to catch the three-dimensional world on two-dimensional canvass, a problem that they eventually solved with unsurpassed success.

To give you another example—Sigmund Freud—there is so much to be said about Freud, but, at the very minimum, every student who reads Freud should recognize him as the person who attempted to mediate the clash between two forces that had been going on for 100 or so years in Europe. They should see Freud as someone who attempted to resolve the conflict between those philosophers who emphasized reason—that is, the philosophers of the Enlightenment—and those who emphasized passion—that is, Jean Jacques Rousseau and the Romantics. If students understand the history of this intellectual conflict, then the fact that Freud comes along and says maybe reason and irrationality can be converted into rationality takes on additional significance.

That's about how far it can go in my introductory psychology course. But over and over again, I try to create a little bit of a link. When I'm doing all this—and sometimes admittedly I am performing some acrobatics—I may not always be right because I am not as knowledgeable in all those other areas. But my purpose is to catch them, to get them interested in something, even if it's not psychology. Should they get turned on by Helmholtz, whose models are a logical representative—or by socioeconomic history or by philosophy or by art history—it doesn't matter. If I have somehow caught their excitement for what learning is all about, then I have been successful. If they become psychologists, all the better that they see the possibility of the links. I find I have to create links when I lecture because the links are often very fragile, and they aren't so easy to put in a textbook. Unfortunately, sometimes the conceptual umbrellas that I have tried to provide by articulating these links have holes in them. What then? This often happens when there are deficiencies in my own understanding. Realistically, there is only so much you can do. It is not possible to be Leonardo today. There is too much to know. But I am not sure it really matters.

On the other hand, there are holes and fragilities I present knowingly. For instance, when I talk about language in an introductory course, I am perfectly aware that I am lying in my teeth. All I can really hope to give these students is a caricature of language as I know and think about it. I can't do anything else. It doesn't matter, though, because, even if the framework is somewhere false, it is better than no framework at all. In some ways, what I'm doing is presenting a scaffold or general structure into which the specific facts and the little theories will fit. If I don't present a structure such as this, the facts will go away anyway. So, even if the scaffolding has to be torn down eventually, it has served its purpose during the time they needed it to remember all these facts they would have forgotten otherwise.

Although most of what I have said thus far concerns the kinds of intellectual effort that are involved in teaching, I believe that teaching is also an emotional process. How do you get students involved? It's a nice spring day. There are many, many things to do that are more interesting than size constancy or Pavlovian extinction. Why should they sit there and become

interested? Because they don't yet have the intrinsic interest—or very few have—it is absolutely crucial that you show that you are involved yourself. If you are not interested, why in God's name should they be?

In some respects teaching is a very emotional experience. It's libidinal. Just as a good actor wants to get an audience involved with the play through the character he or she portrays, good teachers want to get their students involved in the subject. A word of caution here, however. Although you are enormously tempted to allow the students to become involved with you rather than through you, doing so does not serve anyone's real interests and in some senses is too easy. The real trick is to serve as kind of a medium for the subject—what shall I call it?—to be an academic Pandarus. If I manage to get them involved not with psychology but with philosophy, with art history, with some other aspect of the life intellectual, that is fine, too.

The problem of getting students involved becomes particularly perplexing when you have to teach the same course over and over. The problem is exactly equivalent to the problem of an actor in a long-run show. You are Othello, it's the fifth act, and you are supposed to have the emotion of jealousy that leads you to throttle Desdemona. Now, how can you, the actor, want to throttle Desdemona ninety times in a row? Somehow or other you have to recapture the experience you had the first time that you felt that emotion. You learn theatrical tricks for that. You learn how to retrieve a little sliver of that emotion. You train yourself to recapture that feeling.

Another thing in teaching that is analogous to what happens in theater concerns preparation. Even after all the years I have been teaching introductory psychology, I keep on preparing lectures. My colleagues ask me, "Why?" After all, I already know the stuff; I wrote a text. In fact, sometimes I tediously rewrite the lectures and then discover they are exactly the same as last year's. Somehow while doing this—much of which is just dumb activity, like that of the baseball player who tugs at his hat religiously trying to get himself into whatever wacky mood it was that allowed him to swing properly—you begin to recapture what excited you in the first place.

Why do I teach? I will now conclude by commenting on what I get out of teaching. Why do I keep on teaching the same course year in and year out? The answer is not "to keep my job"—I have tenure. I do it because I get satisfaction that is threefold. First, I gain as an intellectual being. When I am teaching people who are new to the field, I have to be sharper, in some fundamental way, as a psychologist than I have to be at other times. You can always fool your colleagues because they are not very smart about their own subject. When you talk to your colleagues, often all you're doing is throwing up clouds of obfuscation, and you get away with it in part because they are polite. After all, if they don't let me get away with it, I won't let them get away with it. You often get away with their not examining your assumptions because they are busy. They go back to their offices and let you get away with presuppositions that you have never really examined because they don't have the time to quibble with you.

This kind of generosity about the presuppositions I make is not true of my students in introductory psychology. These students are like the little boy and the emperor's clothes. They will ask the unaskable nasty questions. They will ask, "Why should I care about college? Or

about pigeons? Or about language free diagrams?" At that point you will have to ask yourself these same questions, honestly, without evasion, because you can't fool them. Obviously, you can fool them easily about the details, but never about the underlying presuppositions in a field. When they start asking rock-bottom questions about why you are really interested in the first place, you are forced to ask yourself very fundamental questions.

When I am teaching these introductory courses, I also gain as a social being. What I get from a good lecture is what an actor gets after a good performance. I get a significant emotional high, a kind of a peak experience. At its best, it is like very few experiences except those that are rather private. Unfortunately, there is a drawback because after a bad lecture I feel like hell. I become depressed. Once, incidentally, I thought I had the solution to this because I gave two introductory psychology courses back to back. Initially, I would always convince myself that, if I messed up in one, I could make up for it in the next. This fiction was great until the day when both of them were terrible. Then I felt like shooting myself, and it was simply because I believe in gun control that I didn't.

But I gain in still another simpler and human way—I gain as a moral being because, when I teach, I get a sense of day-by-day fulfillment that research does not give me. Why? In research the trouble is not whether you have good intentions or whether you are hard working or bright or even creative. You can be all these things, and it is not enough. The only issue is whether you are right. And that, unfortunately, is not up to you, but it's up to nature. This being the case, research may be fine sometimes, but on a day-to-day basis it is frustrating. But, when I teach my introductory courses, things are different. When I teach psychology to these freshmen and to these sophomores, I get an immediate feeling of fulfillment, a sense that in a small way I'm affecting human lives and that I've earned my daily bread. So you could say, teaching is my daily bread and butter; whereas, research is my cake.

To teach is to affect people, usually young people—all sorts of young people. I've been blessed with some wonderful students. The best I've had have gone into psychology, and some are now among our finest scholars in the field. But, even at the finest institutions, it is very rare that many of your students will become distinguished scholars. I've had some of the less-than-best students, too. There is one I'll never forget. I was still young and very, very energetic and I assigned term papers. Good God, 150 term papers to read! I gave him an F because the paper had beautiful prose. The prose was just great, except that I remembered it. So I called him in, and I told him he was a plagiarist. And he convinced me, believe it or not, that I was wrong, that he was not a plagiarist; he was just stupid. He thought that it was all right to copy somebody's knowledge without quotation marks or reference. So he wasn't a plagiarist. What could I do? I think I gave him a D. Well, at graduation, he came up to me and thanked me for teaching him. I felt I had done something valuable for this person.

In conclusion, I believe that the academic business is not just a profession; it's not just a trade; it comes down to being a calling. Teaching the introductory course is just one of the ways in which that calling is practiced. Because of this, on any given day, I can say to myself, "My experiments are going bad, I just lost my research grant, my daughter twisted her ankle, and I had an argument with my wife, but I gave a great introductory psychology lecture." So, all is well!