

NYT Sunday Review | MOLLY WORTHEN
Lecture Me. Really. OCT. 17, 2015

BEFORE the semester began earlier this fall, I went to check out the classroom where I would be teaching an introductory American history course. Like most classrooms at my university, this one featured lots of helpful gadgets: a computer console linked to an audiovisual system, a projector screen that deploys at the touch of a button and USB ports galore. But one thing was missing. The piece of technology that I really needed is centuries old: a simple wooden lectern to hold my lecture notes. I managed to obtain one, but it took a week of emails and phone calls.

Perhaps my request was unusual. Isn't the old-fashioned lecture on the way out? A 2014 study showed that test scores in science and math courses improved after professors replaced lecture time with "active learning" methods like group work — prompting Eric Mazur, a Harvard physicist who has long campaigned against the lecture format, to [declare](#) that "it's almost unethical to be lecturing." Maryellen Weimer, a higher-education blogger, [wrote](#): "If deep understanding is the objective, then the learner had best get out there and play the game."

In many quarters, the active learning craze is only the latest development in a long tradition of complaining about boring professors, flavored with a dash of that other great American pastime, populist resentment of experts. But there is an ominous note in the most recent chorus of calls to replace the "sage on the stage" with student-led discussion. These criticisms intersect with a broader crisis of confidence in the humanities. They are an attempt to further assimilate history, philosophy, literature and their sister disciplines to the goals and methods of the hard sciences — fields whose stars are rising in the eyes of administrators, politicians and higher-education entrepreneurs.

In the humanities, there are sound reasons for sticking with the traditional model of the large lecture course combined with small weekly discussion sections. Lectures are essential for teaching the humanities' most basic skills: comprehension and reasoning, skills whose value extends beyond the classroom to the essential demands of working life and citizenship.

Today's vogue for active learning is nothing new. In 1852, John Henry Newman [wrote](#) in "The Idea of a University" that true learning "consists, not merely in the passive reception into the mind of a number of ideas hitherto unknown to it, but in the mind's energetic and simultaneous action upon and towards and among those new ideas." The lecture course, too, has always had skeptics. In his 1869 inaugural address as president of Harvard University, Charles Eliot [warned](#) that "the lecturer pumps laboriously into sieves. The water may be wholesome, but it runs through. A mind must work to grow."

Eliot was a [chemist](#), so perhaps we should take his criticisms with a grain of salt. In the humanities, a good lecture class does just what Newman said: It keeps students' minds in energetic and simultaneous action. And it teaches a rare skill in our smartphone-app-

added culture: the art of attention, the crucial first step in the “critical thinking” that educational theorists prize.

Those who want to abolish the lecture course do not understand what a lecture is. A lecture is not the declamation of an encyclopedia article. In the humanities, a lecture “places a premium on the connections between individual facts,” Monessa Cummins, the [chairwoman](#) of the classics department and a [popular](#) lecturer at Grinnell College, told me. “It is not a recitation of facts, but the building of an argument.”

Absorbing a long, complex argument is hard work, requiring students to synthesize, organize and react as they listen. In our time, when any reading assignment longer than a Facebook post seems ponderous, students have little experience doing this. Some [research](#) suggests that minority and low-income students struggle even more. But if we abandon the lecture format because students may find it difficult, we do them a disservice. Moreover, we capitulate to the worst features of the customer-service mentality that has seeped into the university from the business world. The solution, instead, is to teach those students how to gain all a great lecture course has to give them.

When Kjirsten Severson first began teaching philosophy at Clackamas Community College in Oregon, she realized that she needed to teach her students how to listen. “Where I needed to start was by teaching them how to create space in their inner world, so they could take on this argument on a clean canvas,” she told me. She assigns an excerpt from Rebecca Shafir’s “The Zen of Listening” to help students learn to clear their minds and focus. This ability to concentrate is not just a study skill. As Dr. Cummins put it, “Can they listen to a political candidate with an analytical ear? Can they go and listen to their minister with an analytical ear? Can they listen to one another? One of the things a lecture does is build that habit.”

Listening continuously and taking notes for an hour is an unusual cognitive experience for most young people. Professors should embrace — and even advertise — lecture courses as an exercise in mindfulness and attention building, a mental workout that counteracts the junk food of nonstop social media. More and more of my colleagues are banning the use of laptops in their classrooms. They say that despite initial grumbling, students usually praise the policy by the end of the semester. “I think the students value a break from their multitasking lives,” Andrew Delbanco, a [professor](#) of American Studies at Columbia University and an award-winning teacher, told me. “The classroom is an unusual space for them to be in: Here’s a person talking about complicated ideas and challenging books and trying not to dumb them down, not playing for laughs, requiring 60 minutes of focused attention.”

Holding their attention is not easy. I lecture from detailed notes, which I rehearse before each class until I know the script well enough to riff when inspiration strikes. I pace around, wave my arms, and call out questions to which I expect an answer. When the hour is done, I’m hot and sweaty. A good lecturer is “someone who conveys that there’s something at stake in what you’re talking about,” Dr. Delbanco said. Or as Ms. Severson told me, “I’m a pretty shy person, but when I lecture, there’s a certain charisma. This stuff matters to me — it saved my life.”

Good lecturers communicate the emotional vitality of the intellectual endeavor (“the way she lectured always made you make connections to your own life,” wrote one of Ms. Severson’s students in an online review). But we also must persuade students to value that aspect of a lecture course often regarded as drudgery: note-taking. Note-taking is important partly for the record it creates, but let’s be honest. Students forget most of the facts we teach them not long after the final exam, if not sooner. The real power of good notes lies in how they shape the mind.

“Note-taking should be just as eloquent as speaking,” said Medora Ahern, a recent graduate of New Saint Andrews College in Idaho. I tracked her down after a visit there persuaded me that this tiny Christian college has preserved some of the best features of a traditional liberal arts education. She told me how learning to take attentive, analytical notes helped her succeed in debates with her classmates. “Debate is really all about note-taking, dissecting your opponent’s idea, reducing it into a single sentence. There’s something about the brevity of notes, putting an idea into a smaller space, that allows you psychologically to overcome that idea.”

Technology can be a saboteur. [Studies](#) suggest that taking notes by hand helps students master material better than typing notes on a laptop, probably because most find it impossible to take verbatim notes with pen and paper. Verbatim transcription is never the goal: Students should synthesize as they listen.

This is not a “passive” learning experience, and it cannot be replicated by asking students to watch videotaped lectures online: the temptations of the Internet, the safeguard of the rewind button and the comforts of the dorm-room sofa are deadly to the attention span. But note-taking is not a skill professors can take for granted. We must teach it. Dr. Cummins assigns one student in each day’s class the task of not only taking notes, but also presenting a critique of her argument at the next class meeting.

This kind of work prepares students to succeed in the class format that so many educators, parents and students fetishize: the small seminar discussion. A lecture course teaches students that listening is not the same thing as thinking about what you plan to say next — and that critical thinking depends on mastery of facts, not knee-jerk opinions. “We don’t want to pretend that all we have to do is prod the student and the truth will come out,” Dr. Delbanco told me.

Such words of caution are deeply unfashionable. But humanists have been beating back calls to update our methods, to follow the lead of the sciences, for a very long time. One hundred and sixty years ago, when education reformers proposed training students only in the sciences or “temporal callings,” John Henry Newman defended the humanities as a repository of moral and cultural knowledge, but also as crucial disciplines for teaching a student how to think, “to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant.” Such a student learns “when to speak and when to be silent,” Newman [wrote](#). “He is able to converse, he is able to listen.”

Molly Worthen is the author, most recently, of “Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism,” an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a contributing opinion writer.