

***Introduction to
University Teaching Series***

Lecturing to Large Groups

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Other titles in the series include:

Balancing Academic Demands on Your Time
Teaching Small Groups
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Table of Contents

Foreword	v
Introduction	1
Pros and Cons of Lecturing	2
What the literature says	3
How Much Information to Include in a Fifty Minute Lecture?	4
Ways of Organising Lectures	5
Classical lecture structure	5
Comparative structure	5
Problem-focused structure	6
Academic argument structure	6
Other ways of structuring	6
Promoting Engagement and Learning in Lecturing	7
Lecturing to Students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds	8
Beginning and Ending the Lecture	9
To Read or Not to Read the Lecture	11
Prior to Giving the Lecture	12
Dealing with Difficult Student Behaviour	12
Trouble shooting	12
Selected Bibliography	14

Foreword

Teaching has always been an important responsibility of university academics. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that the ability to teach a diverse set of students in a range of teaching and learning contexts does not necessarily come automatically once an academic is appointed to a university position. Within the University of New England, there are several forms of resources and support available for newly appointed academics so that they can assume their responsibilities more easily.

This series of booklets Introduction to University Teaching prepared by Dr Izabel Soliman for the Teaching and Learning Centre covers a range of topics of vital interest to those staff who are appointed with limited teaching experience. They also fulfil an important role of providing an overview or refresher for those academics who have been teaching for some time.

With academic life becoming busier and busier, these booklets provide the means to learn about university teaching without the need to attend workshops or seminars. They also offer additional background material and resources to those who do attend the Teaching and Learning Centre workshop program. They provide a flexible approach to learning about university teaching.

I commend these booklets to you. Even those of us with wide teaching experience always find there is something new to learn when it comes to teaching.

Professor Sue Johnston
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Introduction

Lecturing is common practice in universities, for good or for ill. Academics, administrators and students accept it as a fact of academic life. In various countries, the pivotal role of lecturing is exemplified in the designation of academic positions of Lecturer and Senior Lecturer. However, lecturing can be a very daunting experience initially, particularly if one has to lecture to a large number of people in a lecture hall or auditorium. Even experienced academics may find this stressful and feel that they can improve their lecturing skills.

These days, most academics are experiencing increasing work loads which leave little or no time to devote to the study of lecturing skills. Therefore, it was felt in the Teaching and Learning Centre that the production of a practical, easy to read booklet may be useful to those who are new to teaching at the tertiary level or to those who would like to improve their lecturing in the shortest possible time.

In this booklet I briefly set out the case for and against lecturing and then go on to discuss how much information should be included in a lecture. This is followed by examples of different ways of organising a lecture and ways of obtaining and holding the active engagement of the students in the subject matter. Next I present some strategies on lecturing to students from non-English speaking backgrounds, followed by points on how to begin and end the lecture and alternatives to reading the lecture. Finally, I provide some hints on ways of preparing yourself before giving the lecture and on how to deal with difficult behaviour during the lecture. I include a selected bibliography for those who may be interested in learning more about lecturing.

Pros and Cons of Lecturing

There can be little doubt that students do learn from lectures, and that lecturing will continue to be a common method in institutions of higher education.

(Dunkin, 1983, p.75)

I don't believe in lecturing. My Study Guide and Resource Materials are my inputs that take the place of lectures. I meet the students regularly for dialogue, interaction, problem solving and question and answer sessions.

(Views of a Lecturer at UNE)

While lecturing is still a common teaching strategy at the tertiary level, opinion is divided about its value as the quotations above indicate. Students and staff members recalling their own experiences of listening to lectures, have identified the following problems with lectures:

- being overwhelmed or bewildered by the content presented
- feeling anonymous and alienated in the lecture theatre
- confused about what they are supposed to be learning
- not understanding how one part of the content may be related to the other
- having difficulty in taking notes
- being unable to concentrate throughout the whole lecture
- difficulty in analysing or in synthesising information presented
- being unable to evaluate or make critical judgements about the material
- having no opportunity to apply new concepts presented to a concrete situation.

In spite of these problems some academics maintain that lectures still have a purpose in teaching, that lectures enable them to project their enthusiasm for the subject matter and allow students to hear the thoughts of a practitioner in a discipline or field. The related literature includes other perceived functions and benefits of lecturing.

What the literature says

Cannon (1992) maintains that lectures can

- demonstrate a procedure
- illustrate a way of thinking, and
- construct an academic argument.
-

Carroll et al. (1993) found that students value mass lectures because

- each listener has access to the same information
- it's an efficient way of providing a lot of information without interruption, and
- it's a good source of theoretical bases.
-

McCormack (1995) lists the following that lectures can achieve:

- cover large amount of content quickly
- provide information that is new, based on original research, not available in printed materials
- summarize material scattered over a wide variety of resources
- assist students to organise facts in a sensible way.
-

Bligh (1974) concludes the following, after referring to many studies which compare teaching methods:

- with the possible exception of programmed learning, the lecture is as effective as any other method for transmitting information, but not more effective;
- most lectures are not as effective as more active methods for the promotion of thought; and
- changing student attitudes should not normally be the major objective of a lecture.

Lowman (1984) claims that reading, not lectures should carry the major responsibility for conveying information. Lectures should not focus on information giving but rather concentrate on

- the context or historical perspective of an issue
- controversial issues, difficult or key topics/concepts
- topics of special interest to students, and
- a problem solving activity in which the lecturer involves the students by thinking out loud.

How Much Information to Include in a Fifty Minute Lecture?

Probably one of the greatest barriers to effective lecturing is the feeling that one must cover the material at all costs.

(McKeachie 1994, p. 67)

The amount of information included depends on:

- the complexity of new concepts or relationships being introduced; the more complex the fewer should be included
- the degree to which new information can be linked to what is already known, experienced or read by the students
- the average student's attention span which is between 10 to 20 minutes (Penner, 1984)
- on the structure of the lecture.

Ways of Organising Lectures

Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em;

tell 'em;

and then tell 'em what you've told 'em.

(Old advice)

There are many ways of organising the content of lectures in order to clearly convey the information and to encourage the interest and attention of the students. Some of these are described in the following sections.

Classical lecture structure

- Introduction and overview
 - purpose and context
 - revision of earlier material
 - overview of main points in lecture
- First main point
 - development and explanation
 - examples
 - restatement
- Second main point
 - as above
- Third and subsequent points
 - as above
- Summary and conclusion
 - restatement and review of main points
 - conclusion and implications.

Comparative structure

- Introduction and overview
- Theory A

- Theory B
- Criteria for comparing theories
- Comparisons and contrasts between A and B
- Summary and conclusions.

Problem-focused structure

- Statement of problem and overview of solutions
 - Solution A
 - Solution B
 - Solution C
- Criteria for comparing solutions
- Summary and conclusions.

Academic argument structure

- Overview of position on the topic and of supporting arguments
- Counter arguments
- Demolition of counter arguments
- Arguments in favour of lecturer's position
- Conclusion - restatement of lecturer's position.

Other ways of structuring

- moving from simple to complex ideas
- moving from the big picture to the smaller part (or the reverse order)
- linking what students may be expected to know to what they already know
- clarification of misconceptions
- observations of reality linked to abstract ideas, theories and principles
- generalisations linked to particular examples and applications
- identifying the skeleton and linking it to the flesh and vital organs
- clarifying the underlying story/sequence/plot that ties the details together.

- use a mixture of modes of explaining;
 - e.g. narrative - telling a story
 - conceptual - presenting facts or principles in logical order
 - anecdotal- use short stories to illustrate key points.

Promoting Engagement and Learning in Lecturing

To capture and maintain the attention of an audience and to also facilitate learning of the subject matter in a fifty minute period is a challenging task. The following strategies are derived from a combination of literature on lecturing, advice of colleagues and personal experience.

- use vivid examples to bring ideas/theories to life
- use humour which provides interest and emotional release
- use analogies, similes, metaphors to link what is new to what is already known
- use signposting statements which signal direction and structure of lecture;
 - e.g. *"Today I want to examine four approaches to the management of tumours "*
- use framing statements which indicate the sections you will discuss;
 - e.g. *"Let's turn now to the use of chemotherapy"*
- using focusing statements which highlight and emphasize key-points;
 - e.g. *"The basic pharmacological principle underlying chemotherapy is this"*
- break up the lecture every 15 min with some activity;
 - e.g. invite questions, provide a brief summary
- ask students to write down one or two questions they may have at a certain point in the lecture and instruct them to discuss these with a neighbour

- to refocus flagging attention say,
 - "Take two minutes to plan out what further work you need to do on this topic. "*
- check that you are still holding their attention by asking,
 - "Now, before I move on to the next step, is there any point on which you wish further clarification ? "*
- check that they have understood by asking,
 - 'What was the key idea there?'*
- provide interactive lecture notes which are notes with gaps/questions in the text that students fill in during the lecture as a direct result of the information obtained
- use a roving cordless microphone, moving among students a la Oprah, eliciting responses raised by the lecture
- organise lecture in a dialogue form with a colleague, where each person alternates between questioning and answering questions on a topic
- use 'buzz groups' of 2 to 4 students 3 or 4 times during a lecture to tackle a small task
- organise lecture as a sequence of problems to be solved by a buzz group who discuss problem for 2 or 3 minutes
- vary mode of presentation with use of audio visual media, e.g. cartoons, pictures, diagrams, video clips, or slides.

Lecturing to Students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds

Students from non English speaking backgrounds may have difficulty in simultaneously understanding lectures and taking effective notes (Barnett, 1994). The following supportive strategies could be tried:

- providing notice of the content of the lecture beforehand so that students can read up in the area and familiarise themselves with the concepts and terms
- indicating the objectives of the lecture

- providing a visual lecture outline
- providing a list of key or difficult concepts
- speaking more slowly
- using relevant overheads
- projecting enthusiasm for the topic
- providing a lot of examples
- writing down unusual terms and acronyms
- limiting the use of and defining technical terms
- setting time aside for answering questions after the lecture.

Beginning and Ending the Lecture

Good speakers are well known for beginning strongly and ending in a satisfying way. The following are strategies for doing both effectively.

There are a variety of ways to start a lecture which have been grouped below.

Stimulate interest

- start with a real situation
- raise a question in relation to the students' existing knowledge or method of organising material
- start the lecture with a brief test
- point to a gap in students' existing knowledge
- play on their intellectual curiosity through use of puzzles and problems
- create visual interest by using of a slide or video segment.

Project your personality

- establish relationship with group, e.g. eye contact, introduce yourself, and mention something you know about the group
- show your enthusiasm/interest/commitment to the topic
- use expressive voice, varied in pitch, intensity and pace.

Use structuring strategies

- use examples, analogies, metaphors and models which are suitable for the audience and for the topic
- indicate the content and structure of lecture
- indicate the practical relevance of the content
- make links to previous work, interests, concerns, or a topic of current issue
- for a lecture with a comparative structure say,
"Here are two theories. How can we judge between them? Let' see how each one was developed and check how well it applies to reality."
- for a problem focused structure say
"Here's an interesting problem. How might we solve it? Let's develop a few different approaches and see how each one worked."
- for an academic argument structure say
"Here's my position on this argument. Let's look at some counter arguments and how well they stand up to critical scrutiny."
- write down your beginning statement.

For ending the lecture, bear in mind the following points:

- don't allow lecture to trail off or end in mid-sentence
- provide a firm and clear conclusion
- summarize key points and review the links among the activities you have discussed on the links within the topic or with other knowledge and experience
- ask students to summarize key points by saying,
"I'd like to check whether I've got my main points across. Please write down the three most important things you've got from this presentation."
- on the OHP show them what you think these points are
- ask how many agreed with all, two or one of yours or who had other ideas

- end on time
- write down you closing statement.

To Read or Not to Read the Lecture

Reasons for not reading

- you may become disengaged from the material causing students to be disengaged
- can lack credibility
- lacks spontaneity
- breaks down eye contact with audience
- easy to lose one's place
- easy for students to fall into passive receiving role rather than being fully engaged
- you may forfeit dialogue, expressiveness, and animation.

Alternatives to reading

- write out major headings and points on cards
- write out major headings on transparency
- write other key words and phrases on cards or on transparency
- use tree diagrams, flow charts or concept maps to help remember content and sequence of lecture
- try to look at your audience most of the time and give the impression that you are thinking while you are talking.

Prior to Giving the Lecture

There are a number of ways to help yourself remain calm before the lecture and to avoid unnecessary delays:

- arrive early before the students to lay out your lecture material, to check out the equipment you need and how to operate it
- engage the students in informal conversation as they arrive
- prepare a transparency of the title or the key questions of your lecture and project it on the screen when you are ready to begin.

Dealing with Difficult Student Behaviour

What is considered difficult student behaviour will vary among academics, as a general practice, however, try to avoid negative reactions by

- establishing and explaining reasonable rules for student behaviour; e.g. punctuality, not eating and talking during the lecture
- stressing the value of cooperation and consideration
- starting the lecture on a personal, conversational note
- responding to signs of incomprehension, such as glazing eyes, nodding heads, mutterings of discontent with clarification and humour"

Trouble shooting

- *groups of students are talking loudly to each other*
 - stop and wait for silence
 - ask the group to explain their talk to the whole group if it is relevant to the topic
- *students interrupt the lecture by irrelevant comments*
 - stress the topic of the lecture
 - ask them to indicate the relevance of the comment to the topic

- *students make racist, sexist or homophobic remarks*
 - explain that you do not condone such remarks and you would prefer if they did not make them
- *students don't answer when you ask a question*
 - ask open ended questions
 - give plenty of time to respond
 - use buzz groups (impromptu group formed to discuss the question for a few minutes).

Happy Lecturing!

Selected Bibliography

If you want to know more about lecturing you may find the following publications useful.

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