

Dodos, DWEMs, and the Lecture

Nik Jewell

The old adage states "A lecture is a process in which information passes from the notes of the lecturer into the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either." I don't know the source of this adage, but I suspect that it dates back to the days before photocopiers, when this process, if not exactly desirable, did at least serve the stated function.

If the simple transmission of information, stored as written material, is not the function of a lecture, then it must be asked what function the lecture does serve. Up until relatively recent times in my own department, it was standard practice amongst some of my colleagues to tape lectures for the benefit of absentees, presumably because this particular teaching medium was (or is) particularly valued. This practice has declined, and the reason very probably has to do with the provision of computers for all colleagues, which has facilitated the production of lecture handouts. The ubiquity of handouts these days, which has, incidentally, led to an expectancy on the part of students that they will receive one for every lecture they attend, already begins to erode away at the value of the lecture, but that is another issue.

If the medium is valued, then I suspect part of the reason is the view that something extra is transmitted through the presence, performance or enthusiasm for the subject of the lecturer. There is undoubtedly some truth in this; if you are one of the Richard Feynman's of the world, the great educators and communicators, then no doubt your students will be transfixed by the style of your performance, and the clarity of your presentation of difficult content, and this will transform itself, by some not clearly specifiable means, into great understanding, and shared enthusiasm for the material, in your students. However, whilst I am sure we all aspire to this, I suspect that the reality for most of us is rather different.

When lecturing to undergraduate audiences, whilst some of our students will be genuinely enthused by the content we are presenting, our enthusiasm in presenting it, or even the 'performance' we give, the frequent reality is that other students are desperately hung over, have turned up because it is their turn to sign their friends in, or are writing their shopping lists. Even if they are paying attention, it may not be to the content of your lecture. For example: as an undergraduate I started out in Chemistry; I recall, with some shame now, that the main point of interest amongst my fellows on one of my courses was counting how many (perfectly formed) benzene rings the lecturer could draw on a blackboard in 50 minutes. This was a tradition that had been passed down over the years, and comparisons were made with the records of upper year students for the same lecture (I seem to recall over 210 was the absolute record). Further, we all have our personal idiosyncrasies and mannerisms, and I have overhead students discussing their inability to concentrate properly, due to these distractions (or amusements), in the lectures of my colleagues on more than one occasion, just as I have no doubt they do my own.

Another reason for valuing the medium may rest on a division between philosophy as an activity, and philosophy as a

body of knowledge. In many philosophy programmes, divisions are made between the aims and objectives of different levels or years; one such [oversimplified] division commonly concerns the notion that it is important to give students a solid grounding in the history of philosophy (the dead white European males of this article's title), before moving on to the cutting edge, or more topics-based activities. It might be argued, on either side of this division, that the lecture is the appropriate medium for content delivery, but I suspect that many would see that the presentation of the history of philosophy is more amenable to this format. However, I would argue that the initial division, between philosophy as an activity, and philosophy as a body of knowledge, whilst conceptually valid, is not a wholly appropriate basis on which to make subsequent pedagogical divisions about modes of content delivery. By teaching the history of philosophy, **part** of what we hope to engender in our students is a philosophical 'mindset', to show them what it is to think philosophically about issues, in order that they can go on to actively philosophise about new issues that are presented to them. To this end, lectures seem to have little more value than reading a book. By reading a combination of primary and secondary literature, a student becomes familiarised with the thoughts of a philosopher, his influences and influence, and standard objections to, and defences of, his ideas. The real value occurs in follow-up small-group teaching where the student discusses, and actively engages, with the ideas of that philosopher, thereby learning what it is to **do** philosophy. In terms of the material that is to be discussed, as will be broached below, new technologies arguably can provide a better means of content delivery than the lecture.

The idea that the medium of the lecture is inappropriate for the teaching of philosophy, and that small group teaching is the ideal, is certainly not a new one. Hundreds of years of Oxbridge practices attest to this. This raises the final, and perhaps most pertinent, issue that I wish to consider here: cost-effectiveness. The lecture is certainly a cost-effective way of teaching students; although, by now, it should be clear that I am suspicious of what is meant by the notion of 'teaching' in this context. Even here though, different cost-benefit analyses may apply depending on the type of module that is being taught, and the resource model of the institution where it is taught.

By way of an example, at my own institution, we have an internal market, and a significant proportion of our departmental income is derived from service teaching for other departments, and through the delivery of a number of 'sexy' elective modules, popular with the students of other departments. In my own case, for many years I've taught a pair of modules on Buddhist philosophy, the first introductory, and the second more advanced. Both started out as seminar-based courses, but with the second I increasingly found myself spending more and more time lecturing the students in the seminars, from whence it was a short step to the apparently cost-saving move of changing the course to a lecture-tutorial format. However, the question that emerged was: cost-saving for whom? Cost-saving in time and effort for myself, but not for my department, which has lost revenue, because the number of students taking this module (~25) has steadily declined to around 50% of the stable numbers (~50) the module had when it was seminar-based (the numbers taking the first module have remained stable at ~105). In peer reviews I've undergone, it hasn't emerged that I am a poor lecturer; instead, interesting evidence arises from another teaching quality check, the course evaluation questionnaires. A majority of these, received over the years since the conversion to a lecture-tutorial format, have suggested that I should have retained the seminar format of the first module. My conclusion from this is that it was a failure on my part to find an alternative way of presenting this content, in a suitable format for a small-group teaching situation, which has resulted in the dwindling numbers on this module. Now, this is anecdotal evidence, and there may well be other causes of the decline in numbers. Furthermore, this module is a rather special case; however, it is introduced as an example here in order to point out that there are situations where the apparent cost-effectiveness of lectures is not always as clear-cut as it may seem.

In the vast majority of cases, such considerations will not apply, and lectures will still be seen as a cost-effective solution. As we all know already, running seminar-based modules can involve up to twice the contact time with students (for us, not them). However, if our goal is to improve the effectiveness, of both our teaching, and student learning, then the future, I suggest, lies in the replacement of lectures with forms of on-line delivery. As I will argue in a follow-up article, thoughtfully designed web-based material can produce educational benefits that cannot be matched by lectures. I am still rather cautious about the replacement of small-group contact time with on-line discussions, but the latter can certainly be used to supplement tutorials and seminars.

Producing and maintaining on-line materials is certainly time-consuming, in both the short and long term, and the

new technologies are not without their problems, they alienate certain students, and they create institutional issues of equipment and network provision, and training. However, for better or worse, there is an undeniably increasing momentum in the information technology revolution, and given my reservations about the pedagogical effectiveness of lectures, using these technologies to provide new forms of content delivery is not something that should be resisted. Whilst some students now may be resistant to using the new technologies, in a few years time those students who demand the delivery of material in this way will vastly outnumber them.

As a matter of some urgency, I suggest, we have to apply ourselves to the issue of how best to reduce the development time involved in the production of on-line materials, and how to maximise their pedagogical effectiveness. The solution to these problems may very well involve us, as teachers of philosophy, overcoming our resistance to using materials created by others in our teaching. Whilst we can just about afford the time to reinvent the wheel every time we teach a new course using traditional modes of delivery, in the new information age we are not all going to have the time, inclination or ability to do so.

These issues will be resolved and in 20 years time, I predict, the practice of using the lecture as the default mode of content delivery to the student will be as dead as the proverbial dodo. Classic lecture performances will still, of course, be available, as digital streaming video. Ask your institution's Media Services department to capture you in action on video now, before it is too late ...

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