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The Guide on the Stage: In Defense of Good Lecturing in the History Classroom

Jason Stacy

Most of my first year as a history teacher is better left unremembered. I took precious little from my education classes, but I did recall that I needed to be a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage."[1] Lecturing was not only bad form; it was bad pedagogy and symbolized many of the problems in American education. Even Hollywood portrayed lecturing as education-by-attrition: only the most pathologically motivated or terminally uncool maintained consciousness through a lecture on the Hawley-Smoot Tariff.[2] Good teachers engaged and inspired us; students with good teachers smiled and laughed and high-fived each other in the back of the class. Bad teachers did not care whether we learned or not; they taught to the cinder-block walls. I was not sure if I would ever be a good teacher, but I knew what lecturing would make me.

But I loved lecturing. I found that whenever I imagined myself teaching, I imagined myself lecturing. In my mind's eye, I stalked around the front of the room, sleeves rolled to the elbow, tie flipping as I scurried to the board to circle some item of essential importance and dodged the chalk chips that shattered and scattered on the floor. On some days, I even managed to look like this.[3] And my students loved lecturing. This is not to say that they loved taking notes or even necessarily loved learning new things. Instead, it says that they, too, had in their minds' eye an image of the teacher not so different from my own. For them, good learning was listening and, maybe, thinking, but overwhelmingly entertaining.[4] And lecturing was efficient. There seemed to me no better way to introduce a unit, elaborate on a complicated part of the text, present an engaging and telling anecdote, express my love for the subject, and, believe it or not, get to know my students. When I lectured well, there was a give and take and intense engagement with my class. Lecturing let me present material so students could *use it later*. I could portray the basic elements of an historical time period, introduce certain characters that were symbolic of a movement, give some sense of how far we had come since the last unit, where we were going, and why we were going there. I could frame student work with a lecture in such a way that their projects and discussions were *informed*. I could guide them from the stage.

But my students and I knew that our image of a guide on the stage was one we were not supposed to hold. I knew this because of lessons I had learned about "interactive learning" both in college and in my new teacher orientation sessions. The guide on the side who made learning interactive took care to incorporate breakout sessions, short, one-minute self-reflection essays, KWL charts, and cooperative learning.[5] My colleagues proved to have a similarly conflicted relationship with lecturing; many radically changed their teaching styles for an administrative observation. My students sometimes told me that Mr. X suddenly discovered "group work" when the principal showed up to observe him. Though I chuckled along with them, I also made a mental note of self-preservation rather than best practice: I must incorporate cooperative learning *before* the principal came to observe me.

Over time and after tenure, I realized that hiding lecturing or trying to treat it as a secret was really a little absurd. Lecturing, like most things, can be done well and can be done badly. After some reading and experimenting, I discovered that teaching is not an either/or proposition between the sage and the guide. The stage, in fact, was one of many tools.

This essay is an apology. It is, at least, an apology to administrators, colleagues, and peers for 10 years of presenting myself as something that I am not. It is also an apology in the classical sense, namely, a defense. In the years since the publication of Alison King's "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side," new methods of teaching have brought useful changes to social science pedagogy. Good lecturing can be proudly placed alongside newer methods in our repertoire.

Interactive Lecture in the History Classroom

Lately, there has been some good work on interactive lecturing that takes into account the student-centered pedagogy valued by King, but does not assume that lecturing is inherently anathema

to it. For example, in *Advances in Physiology Education*, Hardy Ernst and Kay Colthorpe reported the effect of interactive lecturing in physics and chemistry classes and discovered that lectures that began with 10- to 20-minute "didactic" sections, each of which concentrated on a "content focal point," followed by two-minute "buzz groups" and whole-class discussions around a question or debate, and then repeated the process two to three more times in a given lecture period, resulted in a 20% increase in test scores. Most significantly, this modified 10:2 method—where the teacher talks for no more than 10 minutes and students talk with partners or in small groups for 2 minutes—resulted in better performances by students who typically scored the poorest in the hard sciences: those majoring in speech pathology and occupational therapy.[6] Because these students lacked experience in the hard sciences, they often scored the worst in upper-level physics and chemistry courses (at the end of the course, these students earned a total score of 43.8% on average in 2003), but improved markedly when taught using lecturing methods that allowed them to interact immediately with the material (in 2004 and 2005, these students averaged 68.8% and 67.8% respectively). According to the authors, an interactive lecturing model, which devoted 25% to 35% of the lecture to student engagement with the material and each other, produced significant gains in student learning.[7] This points to synergetic possibilities of so-called "student-centered" and "teacher-centered" methods. As a young teacher, I wrongly and simplistically assumed that the former was good and the latter was bad.

In history, knowledge of the factual framework is required before a student can begin to interact with the material. This is the essence of the constructivist model of learning.[8] Formulated by Jean Piaget nearly 60 years ago, this model assumes that learners engage new material through existing structures of knowledge. Learning, then, is a process of incorporating new material into old paradigms and adjusting these older paradigms according to the newly incorporated material. Piaget called this process "equilibration" wherein a student learns through "assimilation and accommodation." When a learner assimilates new material, he arranges "new experiences within [his] current structure of understandings." This fosters accommodation where the learner "modif[ies] and adjust[s] existing structures to create new mental images to organize data."[9] In short, we need to know something to learn something. New ideas are built upon preexisting structures and reshape and transform these structures during their incorporation.

An interactive lecturer asks students to carry out this process as part of the lecture itself and presents new material in the context of known material, fostering moments that demand "assimilation" and "accommodation." This is a very dynamic process. For example, George Brown and Mali Bakhtar have noted that "exemplary lecturers" in the humanities and social sciences often use lecturing styles different from the traditional "sequential" model. Specifically, these teachers give lectures that are problem centered, comparative, or thesis driven.[10] I have found these types of lectures useful for creating an interactive lecturing style that upholds the constructivist model admired by advocates of the guide on the side.

In the problem-centered model, for example, I often began a lecture for my high school U.S. history students with a problem like "Was Andrew Jackson a democrat or a despot?" This deceptively simple prompt allowed me to spend some time discussing the definitions of each option. Also, it asked students to consider a rather forced dichotomy as the first step to showing the complexity of the question. This, in itself, was a lesson in the nuance of historical debate and the necessity of applying a constructivist model to interactive lecturing: students understood the complexity of the question only after they explored its seemingly simple contours. When it came to the lecture itself, the problem provided a framework for the material that involved more than the usual march from the election of 1828 to the Indian Removal Act to the destruction of the National Bank to the Panic of 1837. In the context of this problem, these facts were suddenly problematic. Was the Trail of Tears the result of a president who listened to the will of the population and, therefore, an example of a good democrat? Or was Native American removal an example of a despotic leader who oppressed a minority to cater to the will of the majority? Is it some combination of the two? This problem, presented in this question, infused the facts with multiple possible meanings. It allowed me to stop in the midst of the lecture and turn to the class and ask whether, at this point, we have democracy or despotism. And, of course, all answers were worth our while as long as they were supported by the facts at hand. This problem-raising lecturing style (which leads nicely to reading primary sources, creating class debates, etc.) gives the facts of a history lecture immediate meaning, and it provides constant opportunities for the teacher to interact with the class to foster students' authentic incorporation of the material into preexisting knowledge.

Likewise, a comparative lecture allows a teacher to force students to assimilate and accommodate new material by placing it in constant opposition to other material. A common example of this for the U.S. survey can be the comparison between the Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian vision of constitutional power. However, this comparison can also be extended to the different constituencies of Jefferson and Hamilton and, then, a class analysis as to why those constituencies would subscribe to those particular constitutional theories. This allows for a comparison of the power dynamics and struggles of the two major factions and nascent political parties during the Federalist period. Again, the comparison is deceptively simple. No scholar would publish an article on this topic. In fact, we would prefer that our students

not write a research paper on such a simple topic. However, at the beginning of the learning process, using this simple dichotomy as a foundation for students' thinking allows them to have a framework on which to build ever more complicated patterns of ideas. I create clear waters in hopes of muddying them.

When using a comparison lecture method, I am always careful to incorporate elements of the problem-centered model as well. For example, in discussing the politics and ideologies of the Federalist period, I raise the question as to why a Massachusetts farmer might be inclined to support the Federalists over the Jeffersonian Republicans in the election of 1800 (as many, in fact, did). This allows the students to bring the very messy historical record back into consideration. Suddenly regional loyalty and the Puritan legacy have to be taken into account. Ideally, the seemingly neat facts I have presented for the past nine weeks become the means by which students learn the nuance of the historiographical process. Sometimes independent farmers vote against what we see as their interests. Why would this be? This allows students to engage in the revising process that fuels historiography itself. They begin with simple descriptive categories and then revise these categories in a process that lends nuance to their understanding. This process infuses historical facts with *meaning* because each fact has the potential to answer questions raised by the teacher and the class; this reduces the necessity of rote memorization since historical information falls into meaningful categories in a student's long-term memory. Perhaps most importantly, meaning and significance is the way in which historians categorize and recall historical information. Under the guidance of a history teacher who sets the framework for this kind of thinking, students can *think historically* while learning the factual framework during an interactive history lecture. In fact, thinking historically and learning history necessarily work together.[11]

A thesis-driven approach allows me to demand interaction from my students even when they are quietly taking notes. When giving a thesis-driven lecture, I inform my students of my arguments and objectives at the very beginning. I also tell them that I will seek to prove the argument to their satisfaction. The meaning of the facts that I present, then, are apparent: I am trying to convince. I find that this method works best when I seek to prove a thesis that students think is wrong (or absurd). For example, I typically teach the decade preceding the American Revolution through this thesis: "The American reaction against British taxation was illegal, unjustified, and fundamentally unnecessary." This thesis certainly wakes up many of my students. Oftentimes, I end up convincing a portion of the class that then wants to debate the other. This lecturing method works best with historical eras or events well known to the students or with material that is in direct opposition to their textbooks. A

Presenting Interactive Lectures

Students must be prepared to engage in Interactive Lectures at the beginning of the course. If a class is accustomed to the traditional kind of passive lecture, it can be difficult to encourage them to interact with you while you lecture.

To begin the acclimation process, either at the beginning or in the midst of the course, incorporate open-ended questions into your lectures. Students, at first, might assume that you are looking for a single answer. However, once a student responds, ask the question again and look for another response.

If you are feeling especially daring, in a friendly manner ask for a counter response, or even offer a counter response yourself. It will be important to show that you enjoy the interaction and do not let anyone "win" the debate; be sure to integrate student ideas and arguments into your lecture when possible.

Evaluating Interactive Lectures

Interactive Lectures give the teacher an immediate and useful assessment of student learning. If students are unable to generate an opinion in a thoughtful and informed manner, or prove unable to analyze and synthesize the material in a meaningful way, it becomes readily apparent that the material has not been assimilated into students' memory.

In this way, Interactive Lectures help overcome the danger of traditional lectures where students might *appear* to understand the material, but because of the passive stance required on the part of students in a traditional lecture, a meaningful assessment is impossible on the teacher's part. On the other hand, an Interactive Lecture *cannot happen* without some degree of student understanding. In the midst of student-teacher and student-student interaction, the instructor can quickly assess general comprehension.

Preparing Interactive Lectures

Like any lecture, Interactive Lectures require a strong familiarity with the material and a sense of the extent to which your students are already familiar with it.

In preparing, think about material you plan to teach in a fashion that will raise questions, spark debates, and challenge student assumptions.

Sometimes, when I teach material that I am sure will be entirely new to my students, I use the basic 10:2 strategy; I teach new material for ten minutes, then pose an open-ended question that requires students to generate an opinion about the material I just taught. I write these questions into my lecture; so, when I present thirty-minutes worth of new material, I ask three open-ended questions (one question every ten minutes). Ultimately, this means that thirty minutes of new material will take at least forty minutes or so to teach.

thesis-driven lecture challenges students and invites them to prove me wrong. In this regard, a teacher must preempt a student's knowledge of a subject, as well as present an engaging alternative to the student's understanding. This, in itself, is an interesting exercise for the lecturer who aspires to a constructivist style. It requires me to analyze my students' preexisting knowledge of a subject and helps me generate the assimilation and accommodation process in them.

I think interactive lecturing is a style of teaching that can be used with success at any level in social science education; the differences will be in matters of degree. I have seen a student teacher use an interactive lecturing style with sixth graders who were learning the geography of Egypt where he projected a map of Egypt onto the whiteboard at the front of the class and asked students to offer answers to guiding questions like "Using what we know about human needs for trade and agriculture, where do you think we would find most of the human settlement in Egypt?" And, "How do you think these settlement patterns might affect government and religion in ancient Egypt?" The projected map allowed him to note student ideas on the whiteboard while guiding their ideas through refining and clarifying questions. During this interactive lecture, the teacher maintained a high level of student engagement for almost 30 minutes. I use an interactive lecturing method when I teach my upper-division history majors about historiographical trends by taking a position for, or against, a particular book's thesis and method and subtly watch the class divide over my (often intentionally divisive) arguments. In neither case is the interactive lecture confused with a classroom *discussion*. Even the most structured discussion is intrinsically (and ideally) discussant-led; the value of a classroom dialogue between students is to allow participants to follow their debate where it leads them; in a discussion, the teacher is truly a guide on the side. An interactive lecture, on the other hand, is explicitly *didactic*; it has clear information that must be purveyed over the course of a discrete period of time and uses student interaction as the means by which this information is learned.

Conclusion

Lecturing can be done well or it can be done badly. It is wrong to assume that certain methods of teaching are inherently poor pedagogy, or, for that matter, to go through the motions of carrying out best practices without considering the ways in which practices (even those supposedly the best) can be executed poorly. One problem from which lecturing suffers among many young teachers is a widespread belief that it not only takes intense research and preparation on the part of the instructor, but also that it pays the least dividends in terms of student learning. This is a product of a constructivist model that assumes that the give and take of learning cannot happen in the didactic environment of the lecture. The problem, however, is not lecturing, but bad lecturing. Lectures need not be merely didactic.

For many history teachers whose style is to lecture, an interactive lecturing style in the history classroom is the answer to charges about the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of their method. A lecture style that incorporates problem-centered, comparative, and thesis-driven lessons allows the teacher to present the factual framework essential to analyzing the historical record and demands that students actively engage the material in the process. It is time to open the classroom doors and allow our administrators and colleagues to see the good lecturing that we do.

Notes

1. This phrase was by Alison King in "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side," *College Teaching* 41 (1993): 30-35. King argues that a constructivist model, requiring students to incorporate new material into existing mental structures, rather than the transmittal model, based on a method of didactic lecturing and note taking, requires a teacher who can "*facilitate* students' interaction with the material and with each other in their knowledge-producing endeavor." For King, the constructivist model encourages more authentic and long-lasting learning in the student. For an essay on the problems of the transmittal model in history specifically, see Michael Zuckerman, "A Modest Proposal: Less (Authority) is More (Learning)," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002): 4-6.
2. Compare the character of the teacher played by Ben Stein in "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" (1986) to the engaging, activity-based teacher played by Robin Williams in "Dead Poets Society" (1989).
3. Michael Zuckerman had a similarly heroic image of himself as a lecturer in a history class admitting, "I like adulation as much as the next guy." However, for Zuckerman, "the lecture does not do nearly as much for my students as it does for me.... It confirms my students in their understanding of themselves as consumers and of their society as founded upon the star system," Zuckerman, 4-6.
4. For a useful description of the lecturer as performance artist, see Mike O'Connell, "The Sage for the Ages," *The Chronicle of Review, Section B, The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 20, 2007), B5. O'Connell describes the ideal lecturer as "... idiosyncratic, iconoclastic, profane, unimpeachable." According to O'Connell, "On the way into the campus cafeteria after his morning lecture, someone is sure to call out 'Did you hear what old Higgenbottom said in class today?'"
5. KWL stands for "Know, Want to Know, Learned." This reflection model was developed by Donna Ogle in "K-W-L: A Teaching Model that Develops Active Reading of Expository Text," *The Reading Teacher* 39 (1986) 564-570.
6. For a description of the 10:2 strategy, see Tanya Yerigan, "Getting Active in the Classroom," *Journal of College Teaching & Learning* 5, no. 6 (2008): 19-24.
7. Hardy Ernst and Kay Colthorpe, "The Efficacy of Interactive Lecturing for Students with Diverse Science Backgrounds," *Advances in Physiology Education* 31 (2007): 41-44.
8. See Bruce A. Marlowe and Marilyn L. Page, *Creating and Sustaining the Constructivist Classroom* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Crown Press, Inc., 1998), 18; and Edwards Jadallah, "Constructivist Learning Experiences for Social Studies," *The Social Studies* 91 (September/October 2000): 221.
9. Michael Henry, "Constructivism in the Community College Classroom," *The History Teacher* 36, no. 1 (2002).
10. George Brown and Mali Bakhtar, "Styles of Lecturing: A Study and Its Implications," *Research Papers in Education* 3, no. 2 (1988): 143-144.
11. See Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2001).

Jason Stacy *taught history for 10 years in the Illinois public school system. Currently, he is an assistant professor of history and social science pedagogy at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and edits* The Councilor: The Journal of the Illinois Council for the Social Studies. *He can be reached at* jstacy@siue.edu.