

Teaching Remotely

What Educators Can Learn from One Another

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Lecturing (part 1 of 3)

Part 1 – The Lecturing

With several schools already announcing they will not reopen normally in the fall; many educators are hoping to take advantage of the summer to improve on this spring's sink-or-swim plunge into distance learning.

While much of this reflection is likely to take place within communities of practice in K-12 or higher education, there may be additional things to discover from the cross-pollination that takes place when educators working in separate spheres learn from one another.

In my 2014 book *MOOCS Essentials*, I reflected on each aspect of the residential learning process and how developers of massive open online courses were trying to replicate those experience virtually, or make up for shortcomings inherent the extreme case of distance learning without direct teacher-student interaction. This was followed by a stint helping to create a new graduate school of education that required understanding the job of a teacher well enough to create a set of teachable and measurable competencies that would undergird a competency-based teacher-education program.

This series will distill insights from those experiences into recommendations for how teachers can improve individual components of courses they may teach remotely in the fall, starting with the lecture.

The Effectiveness of Lectures

In his 1971 book *What's the Use of Lectures?*, author Donald Bligh compared the four things teachers claimed students would get from lectures (acquisition of information, promotion of thought, changes in attitude, and development of behavior skills) with what research showed students actually gained from being lectured to (only acquisition of information).

While his study left plenty of room for the inspirational teacher whose lectures are so compelling they can hold student attention for hours, the fact that student attention spans and memory stamina vary widely pointed to the efficacy of breaking the lecture into smaller increments (Bligh recommended no longer than 20-30 minutes).

These insights explain why the lecture format becomes more prominent in late secondary and post-secondary education, versus earlier grades when teachers break up activities within a classroom period in order to facilitate goals beyond knowledge transfer, such as the cognitive and behavioral training that prepares students to learn in more didactic educational environments (like college).

degree of freedom

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Learning Across Grades

Any college professor who noticed dramatic drop-off in attendance and participation in spring virtual courses that tried to preserve an existing lecture format could benefit from strategies K-12 educators learn in teacher-preparation programs regarding how to structure classroom time.

Unlike in-person college classrooms where professors can expect students who come to class to conform to college-level norms (such as sitting through an hour-long lecture and at least appear to be attentive), K-12 teachers think of the classroom period as a block of minutes that needs to be carefully structured to maximize the potential for student engagement.

For example, a 50-minute period might begin with a “Do Now,” a brief exercise designed to introduce students to what they will be learning, followed by short segments that might include lecture, group activity, discussion, or individual work. When developed by experienced teachers, these segments are carefully choreographed to consider not just the content being taught, but the needs of each individual student.

Such a structure leverages Bligh’s insight that shorter versus longer lectures support the key benefit of lecturing: knowledge transfer, while leaving time for other activities that can support educational goals such as promotion of thought, changes in attitude, and development of behavior skills.

Learning Across Modalities

The benefit of shorter versus longer lectures is well understood by developers of online educational material who have learned through trial and error (as well as purposeful experimentation) when students either click away or otherwise tune out from a recorded lecture. The success of Khan Academy videos (almost all of which are under 10 minutes) served as a template for developers of cutting-edge online-learning experiences, including massive open online courses.

For example, many courses included online “field trips” to museums or research centers that included interviews with artists and scientists, or demonstrations one could not experience in physical environments, such as dangerous experiments or imaging that allowed you to virtually “turn over” fragile artifacts to look beneath. While teachers struggling through the current crisis do not have access to production studios (or even the ability to go far from their homes, with or without a camera crew), thousands of museums and other institutions have made resources available for teachers to integrate into their online courses.

Professors also experimented with lecture formats that did away with podiums and blackboards. For instance, one MOOC professor framed the didactic portions of his course as conversations between himself and a handful of graduate students, creating

the feeling that you were not being lectured to, but instead eavesdropping on intimate discussions. A teacher interested in mixing things up with regard to lecturing can try their own experimentation with formats by simply thinking where they can point the camera, other than at their own face.

Synthesizing effective methodologies used across educational sectors leaves educators at any level with a roadmap to follow as they consider what to do with the lecture portions of their courses if remote teaching is the norm for part or all of the coming academic year, notably:

1. Determine how many of those activities require direct instruction versus discussion or some other form of teacher-to-student or student-to-student interaction or activity.
2. Research the availability of instructional material (such as virtual tours or interviews with experts) that can help students accomplish learning goals that do not involve a teacher talking directly into the camera.
3. Get creative with the format of your live or recorded lecturing. Conversations, interviews, theatricality (if you are so inclined) are all ways to get what you are trying to teach across without being yet another talking head in students’ virtual lives.