

**No More
TELLING AS TEACHING
LESS LECTURE,
MORE ENGAGED LEARNING**

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SECTION 1

NOT THIS

A Lecture-Only Approach Doesn't Ensure Learning

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Time is every teacher's enemy: there is always more to teach than time to teach it. Every year, educators are asked to add more to our plate; every year, we try to comply. We're not only expected to cover our content and improve students' ability to read and write but also to ensure that students meet the demands of rigorous state and national standards.

Teaching is incredibly complex, and we take our job very seriously. We want to do what is best for our students, and sometimes that means having to make tough decisions. Do we give up content lectures as our primary mode of instruction, knowing that not getting to all the curriculum could put some students at a disadvantage come test time? Or do we lecture on as much subject matter as possible, knowing that some kids are disengaging? At the very least, lecturing to cover content lets us look our administrator in the eye and say, "I taught it." Lecturing can make covering unrealistic amounts of content conceivable, but do

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we have evidence that students have really learned when this is our main method of instruction?

Recently, I came across a log completed by a preservice teacher who was observing, first, a high school social studies class on modern world history (an elective with a mix of tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders), and then an English class of all seniors:

Observation 1 (Social Studies Class)

At the beginning of the period, the teacher announced that a movie on Brazil would be presented the following day. He then called on members of the class to read aloud several paragraphs from the course textbook. Then he tried to stimulate a class discussion by asking, "What were the differences between the colonization of Latin America and the colonization of the United States?" When only a few of the kids participated, he finished the class with a lecture. The entire chapter was covered during the class period. The teacher's objective seemed to be to acquaint the class with the customs and background of settlers of Latin America in comparison with settlers of the United States. Attention was not what it could have been. Students didn't confine their talking to the subject.

Observation 2 (English Class)

For the majority of the time, the teacher talked about the novel the students were reading, while they took notes. Afterward, she told me that her goal was to get students writing more, because local universities were reporting that incoming freshman had subpar writing skills. However, because her students didn't seem to be reading at home and some were struggling readers, she felt compelled to go over the assigned pages in class. This took time away from the writing, but she explained that if the students didn't understand the novel, they couldn't write the essay.

[These observations were made by my mother on December 20, 1953. I was surprised how little things have changed!]

When there is more to teach than time to teach it, taking over is faster than letting students construct meaning on their own. Lecturing at students all the time rather than using it as only one piece of instruction helps teachers plow through content. Year after year, we are asked to participate in various district initiatives (many of which come and go). As class sizes increase and we try to meet the needs of 130 or more students, lecturing is an instructional strategy that remains the same and at least exposes kids to required content.

Lecturing: A Dirty Word?

Let's acknowledge that lecturing in and of itself isn't a bad way to share information, ideas, and points of view, and under the right circumstances some people learn from it. The problem is that when our only instructional method is lecture, we can't tell which students are constructing meaning and which ones are tuning out.

Most of the lectures I listened to as a student were the "fire hose" type. The teacher provides vast amounts of information so rapidly that the students can't possibly take it all in: it's like trying to drink from a fire hose.

But today, I rarely meet teachers who brag that they teach only through lecture. Instead, I hear statements like, "I don't do that stand-and-deliver thing my teachers did. I make my lectures interactive. I call on individual students to share their thinking." This is certainly better than the fire hose lecture, but when this kind of lecture takes up the majority of instructional time, we don't know who is cognitively engaged and who has tuned out.

Sometimes I hear from teachers about how they have carefully crafted their long lectures in the form of stories and lessons to enhance engagement. I do believe that makes for a more engaging lecture, of course, but a lecture couched in narrative works only for students who are emotionally engaged with the topic or the teacher. Those who don't care about the stories or the topic have another chance to disengage.

For further information on why teachers overuse lecture

see Section 2, page 14.

Many teachers add “turn and talk” or ask students to take notes during their carefully crafted lectures. Certainly, the layering of those techniques improves the learning potential of a lecture. Some science and math teachers use a “clicker” approach so that more students can see the thinking of their peers in response to a problem or question. This can be effective as long as students are intellectually curious about the topic. But for those who aren’t, randomly clicking answers or furiously jotting something down on paper and then talking to a neighbor is an easy way to avoid learning.

I believe that each of these approaches comes from good intentions, and Elizabeth will explain in more detail how these work to some degree in Section 2. As teachers, we want to engage our students in learning but we don’t always know the most effective methods for doing so. And, for learners who are ready to hear what we

have to share, telling *can* be effective. The problem with lecture-only instruction, however, is that students can too easily fake their learning, and we never know otherwise until we assess. When we rely only on lecture, we are at a disadvantage: while we are talking, it’s too hard to tell who is learning, who is stuck, and who has checked out.

“But Lecturing Worked for Me”

Often teachers tell me that lecturing worked for them as students—and if it worked for them, it should work for kids today. I can relate: in some of my classes, being lectured to was effective. In those classes, I had a strong background and/or curiosity, so I was intrigued by what the lecturer had to say. Because my degree required preservice hours in schools, I had the opportunity to try out what I was being told in the lectures.

However, in the classes that I didn’t really care about or that I thought were irrelevant but necessary for graduation, lecturing wasn’t useful. In those classes, I was engaged behaviorally so as not to draw attention to myself. I put in my seat time and had coping strategies that helped me endure the boredom. Sometimes, I would do work for other classes, then just to show I was “paying attention” ask a timely question designed to make the teacher feel I cared. If the test was short-answer or multiple-choice, I’d make an appointment with the teacher beforehand and ask him what material I should pay attention to. I’d memorize a few facts and drop them into my constructed responses. After a few grades or quizzes, I’d start to pick up on the pattern of grading and adjust my answers for the next assignment.

I learned how to be a teacher pleaser, and every year I got better at gaming the system. Some teachers thought I cared when I didn’t. Others thought I was bright and hardworking when I wasn’t. The downside to the pedagogy of telling as an instructional mode is that it makes it really hard for the lecturer to tell when and for whom the lecture is effective.

The “good” students may be compliant simply to get a good grade and the “bad” students may be off task because they choose not to hide their boredom or confusion. The archaic caste system of secondary schools that places students in tracked courses because of a perceived natural order of intellect or behavior may or may not be accurate. It takes further probing to know if students are learning from the lecture. By covering content through telling, the teacher is controlling how the content is being delivered but isn’t controlling how students process, remember, or understand the information.

For those of us who learned through lecture, several conditions were probably in place. First, the lecturer was an engaging speaker. There are many teachers who are engaging. They’ve been bitten by the

If we want students to love math enough to become mathematicians, for example, we need to give them experiences that allow them to inquire as mathematicians. You’ll find specific examples of this work in Sections 2 and 3.

Although activities like these can increase the level of engagement and learning, they don’t offer students authentic application of the skills and content they’re learning. In Section 2, Elizabeth will offer a disciplinary model of learning, and in Section 3 will provide some specific examples from my teaching.

entertainment bug and can often hold kids' attention for short periods of time. Second, we were interested in the topic. Each of us can probably name a handful of students who love our class and may even become teachers themselves, but for the majority that's not the case. Lastly, we had time to apply the information we'd heard. If we don't get time to process, the information is quickly forgotten. When the lecturer is engaging, the topic is relevant, and the learning is immediately applied, some students can benefit from the lecture mode of instruction. Unfortunately, students aren't always enthralled with the subject matter, and if we are lecturing the whole time, there is no room for application. In Section 2, Elizabeth will shed further light on the science of how we learn.

Could We Limit Our Use of Lecture?

Even without the mountains of brain research, we know that people have trouble sitting and listening for extended periods of time. Dr. John Medina, director of the Brain Center for Applied Learning Research at Seattle Pacific University, writes that adults can only listen attentively for ten or so minutes before needing a brain break. Medina (2008) does the math with a typical one-hour lecture: "Before the first quarter-hour is over in a typical presentation, people *usually* have checked out." Medina compares school lectures to a business model and notes, "If keeping someone's interest in a lecture were a business, it would have an 80 percent failure rate" (74). This low success rate makes a compelling case for rethinking how to make better use of class time. Teachers can lecture their socks off but if only a few students are paying attention after ten minutes, what's the point?

It's understandable that to do all that is asked of us we sometimes resort to instructional practices that are more efficient than effective. Unlimited lecturing is efficient but not effective. When I don't intentionally plan the work that students will do in class, I find myself talking at them way more than I intend to. It happens when I underestimate the amount of curriculum I have and I overestimate the time I have to teach it.

Recently, I led a three-day workshop and because I tried to teach more than I had time for, I ended up resorting to talk. Each day I extolled the virtues of letting learners do the work, emphasizing how important it was for teachers to limit their talking so kids could engage and practice critical thinking. Ironically, when it was time to collect the evaluations, one came back that wasn't as glowing as I would have liked. (See Figure 1-1.) This participant would have gotten more out of the institute if I had given her and her colleagues more time to read, write, and discuss their learning. Time got the best of me and I fell into the trap of lecturing. The pressure to cover the "content" drove

Figure 1-1 Evaluation Form

Comprehension Times Three Denver, July 2012 EVALUATION FORM				
	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	No Opinion	Strongly Disagree
1. The institute increased my knowledge and skills in my areas of certification, endorsement or teaching assignment.	☐	☒	☐	☐
2. The relevance of this activity to teaching standards was clear.	☒	☐	☐	☐
3. It was clear that the activity was presented by persons with education and experience in the subject matter.	☒	☐	☐	☐
4. The material was presented in an organized, easily understood manner.	☐	☒	☐	☐
5. This activity included discussion, critique, or applications of what was presented, observed, learned, or demonstrated	☐	☐	☐	☐

My afternoon breakout sessions were with: Chris T (Stephanie, Debbie, or Chris)

The best features of this activity were: Lots of useful strategies and thoughts to inform my teaching. Also seeing that she also has kids that "blow" on assignments. It's not magically great everyday in her class with students but not in practice, felt more teacher talk than student talk.

Suggestions and reactions I wish to offer: Lots of discussion on teaching but not in practice, felt more teacher talk than student talk. We are good things to inform my teaching practices. Thank you. us practice us discuss

Other thoughts and reactions I wish to offer: But! I got lots of more teacher talk than student talk. We are good things to inform my teaching practices. Thank you. us practice us discuss

Ouch!

me to talk, so, unfortunately, teachers listened more than they got to apply the information. I can't help but wonder how much of what they heard was forgotten.

Who Is Doing the Work?

Both teachers my mother observed in 1953 made attempts to engage students, but because the teachers were doing the majority of the work, it was difficult to gauge students' thinking. Any form of passive learning—copying notes, watching a video, reading a text to answer previously provided questions, listening to a lecture—doesn't require much participation from the learner. Covering content and ensuring that all students are engaged in learning are two different goals.

We want our students to succeed. When time is short and the focus of instruction is on content rather than critical thinking, it's tempting to take over and tell kids what they should know. Instruction changes when we shift from telling to helping students construct meaning. When we forget what matters most in learning and engage in classroom practices like reading aloud to cover content or lecturing to get through material, we ignore how we learn best. When we do all the work, we unintentionally rob students of their opportunities to learn.

As an instructional coach, one of the first questions I ask is "What matters most to learning?" Here are some common responses:

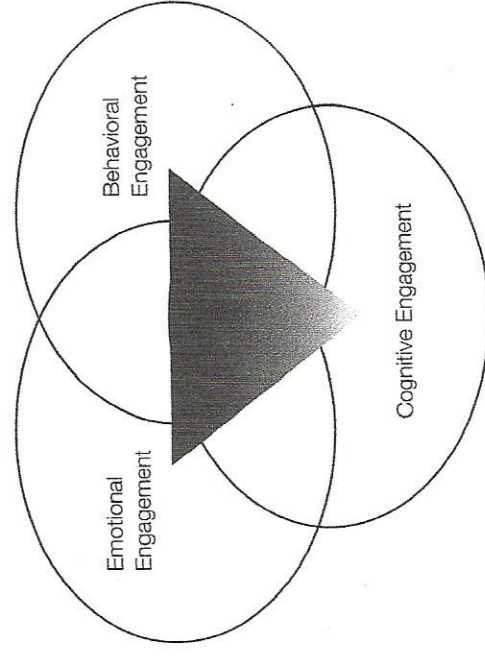
- I need a chance to mess around with the concept, time to practice.
- I won't work hard if the learning isn't interesting or immediately relevant.
- I need to see the purpose for the learning and how I can apply it.
- I need choice in what I read, write, and practice.
- I want to collaborate with someone who is also invested in the learning.
- I need time to think.

- I need to get and give feedback about my learning so I can redo or revise my thinking or working.
- I want to do real work and figure something out that hasn't already been done.

I've never once had a teacher say they needed a lecture to learn.

When I consider what prompts my own engagement, three things come to mind: I have to know how to behave in a way that is productive to learning; I have to have some emotional connection to the topic or the people I'm learning from and with; and I have to be intellectually stimulated. The engagement of the learners in my classroom is also demonstrated by how they "behave, feel, and think" (Fredricks et al. 2004, 59). The intersection of all three types of engagement (see Figure 1–2) provides many reasons for students to work hard and requires that we plan differently than we do when we lecture.

Figure 1–2 The Intersection of Three Types of Engagement



Often the challenge for teachers is envisioning a teaching model that reflects these commonsense responses. It's not because they don't have the capacity to do otherwise but rather because the lack of a model has left them trapped into thinking there is only one way to deliver instruction.

Behavioral engagement targets learners' sense of competence. Students who are behaviorally engaged participate—they respond to the task in obvious ways. They know the behavior that will help them succeed in academic situations. Behaviorally engaged students turn in work on time and apply strategies that enable them to persist when the going gets tough. They ask questions in class and volunteer their thinking.

Emotional engagement targets individuals' need to connect. Learning can begin and be sustained when students have connections to the teacher, their peers, and/or the topic. We cannot underestimate the influence that feelings and emotions have on students when it comes to learning. When we create in our students a sense of belonging to a community or project, students work harder and longer.

Cognitive engagement targets the need to know. When students are cognitively engaged, they see a purpose and a need to uncover information and master concepts. Cognitively engaged learners see how what they are learning is connected to the world outside school. They aren't doing the work for the grade but for the gratification of knowing. Cognitively engaged students are invested in their learning. Fredricks and her colleagues (2004) define this type of engagement by labeling what students do as their "psychological investment in and effort directed toward the learning, understanding, mastering the knowledge, skills or crafts that the academic work is intended to promote" (64).

Giving up or at least minimizing time spent lecturing will be a shock to the system for sure. It means releasing some control and that's scary. But, take heart. There are lots of important aspects of instruction that we are still in charge of. True, we can't control how students think, but we can control how we structure the class period so that kids have opportunities to think. We can't control students' reading levels, but we can provide reading choices so students can access content. Rich text can draw students to the subject area so kids will want to read more about the content. By modeling for students how we, the content experts, think when reading and writing, we inspire students to read and write better and more often on their own. We don't have a

lot of say about the adopted state and national standards, but we can plan units that give students meaningful ways to apply the standards before the high-stakes assessments are given.

It's trite to say, but most of us can't work any harder than we already do. We have to work smarter. When we exhaust ourselves lecturing to cover content, we feel we're earning our keep. But in the end, students are suffering as much as we are. Sadly, secondary schools are losing too many kids. According to "Diplomas Count 2012: High School Redesign" (*Education Week*, June 7, 2012), "1.1 million students still fail to earn diplomas." Dropout rates are discouraging and the forecast for producing critical thinkers is gloomy. As a profession, we have to take advantage of the latest, best research we have available to do better by our kids. Our country depends on the job we do with the students sitting before us. We are the ones who will make the difference.

In the next section, University of Michigan researcher Elizabeth Moje synthesizes the research on lecturing and how people learn. She cites studies and examples of why it isn't the most effective way to deliver instruction. Her thinking gives us the impetus to consider other ways to address teaching and learning.