Large Classroom Teaching

MAXIMIZING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

using · narrative

When I started my university career, I thought I had what it took to be an engaging lecturer. Yet many of the things I thought I knew about how to captivate students proved to be wrong. My errors were legion- I could go on for hours reciting them. However, I will discuss just two of my sins here.

Avoid my sins and you will become more engaging in the large undergraduate classroom.

My first sin was **HUBRIS**, the Greek term for arrogance. Arrogance often stems from insecurity, and new lecturers are often insecure. This is hardly surprising since they are just beginning to figure out how to perform their role. Moreover, as the world's leading experts in the subjects of their PhD dissertations but little else, new lecturers often lack the breadth of knowledge that is required in the undergraduate classroom. As a result, new lecturers sometimes speak authoritatively when the evidentiary basis for authoritative pronouncements is weak. They sometimes dismiss students' contrary judgments too quickly in an effort to bolster their own fragile authority. I incorrectly assumed that, as a professor, I was supposed to know more than my students did, including the answers to all of their questions – and when I didn't, my insecurity mounted. I covered it up by trying to sound as if I knew it all when nothing could have been further from the truth. I don't think I was highly unusual in committing the sin of hubris.

It didn't take long for me to learn that students are adept at seeing through such facades. I also learned that admitting the limitations of my knowledge was actually the most engaging pedagogical tool I owned. These days, on the many occasions when I don't know the answer to a question, I use my ignorance as an opportunity to explain to students how we can find the answer. When they hold an opinion that differs from mine, I explore with them how we can decide which opinion is sounder. Curiosity about what we don't know, and differences of opinion about what we think we know, thus become incentives for learning how to do research. The most important thing we can teach our students is not that force equals mass times acceleration or that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was a cause of World War I, but that it is possible to produce new knowledge by pursuing certain methods of inquiry. Paradoxically, the thing I feared most as a new lecturer – professorial ignorance – turned out to be pedagogical bliss.

I would go so far as to say that my professions of ignorance have led to my best teaching experiences and my students' best learning experiences. Six years ago, I became embroiled in a heated debate with my 1,400 first-year students about why gender inequality is more pronounced in some countries than in others. Because we could not resolve certain differences of opinion, I selected two dozen "A" students to work with me collecting and analyzing data on the subject and writing up our findings.

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Our efforts proved so successful that the leading Canadian sociology journal published the results of our work. Last year, much the same thing happened. My first-year students and I became involved in an elaborate debate about the social causes of cancer, so I chose two dozen of my top students to research the subject with me and write up our findings. Our work will be published as a book chapter. The extraordinary young men and women who worked with me benefited tremendously from the opportunity to help conduct research while still undergraduates. Many of them regarded it as the most rewarding experience they had in university. They are thrilled to see their names in print. I was equally excited working with them. All this because I underscored my ignorance and convinced my students that, in the face of ignorance, we had to do research to find answers.

My second cardinal sin as a new lecturer was GRAVITAS, the Greek term for seriousness. As a new lecturer, I thought my job was to convey as much important information as possible. I did not pay much attention to my delivery method. However, my students soon made it clear that information won't arrive at its intended destination if the wheels of the delivery vehicle fall off, or if the vehicle is otherwise structurally unsound. And so I tried to figure out the lecture structure that conveys information most effectively.

I eventually arrived at the conclusion that I could best get my points across by maximizing student engagement using narrative. Narrative – storytelling – is the mechanism people use to render the world orderly and make it intelligible. In the classroom, stories help students understand ideas on an emotional as well as an intellectual level; and when they form an emotional attachment to ideas, the ideas stay with them more effectively than if their attachment is solely intellectual. In a phrase, I came to believe that engaging lecturers are good storytellers.

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Rules govern the structure of narrative, and I try to abide by them whenever I address my students:

1. Good lectures, like good stories, follow a prepared script. I don't always follow my script, but I never enter the lecture room without a text laying out word for word exactly what I want to say.

2. In good lectures, as in good stories, the script must remain invisible. Students engagement peaks when a lecture seems to unfold naturally and spontaneously. Lectures must be carefully staged, but they must never appear to be so.

3. Good lectures, like good stories, have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I like to start with a memorable anecdote that captures the key issue addressed by the lecture, a story that simultaneously hooks students and provides them with a hook on which they can hang the information I'm about to convey. During the main body of the lecture, I refer back to the opening story so students can see how each point relates to the opening anecdote. To end, I summarize my argument by showing how each point I've sought to establish leads to a particular conclusion.

4. Good lectures, like good stories, encourage audience participation. In literature, authors achieve audience participation by evoking empathy. In the large lecture hall, we can establish dialogue and provoke debate using a wider range of tools, including video clips, PowerPoints, music and clickers.

5. Good lecturers, like good storytellers, maintain audience interest by varying their pace, tone and style. Monotonic presentations inevitably bore audiences, but in the space of an hour or two, we can and should introduce comedy, tragedy, farce, and other dramatic forms to enliven our presentations.

6. Finally, we must always leave our audience wanting more. These are a few of the main principles of narrative that we can use to maximize student engagement. I hope these ideas will entice you to want to learn more!

Allow me to conclude by emphasizing that, while the approach I have outlined works well for me, other approaches to engaging students in the large classroom will work just as effectively for other instructors. We're all different. However, what we have in common is that we can all benefit from careful planning.

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