



Teaching and Learning Economics

What makes a good lecture?

A review of some recent research findings

Recently I have come across a number of papers¹ which attempt to evaluate the lecture as a teaching/learning device. Their prime aim is to identify what makes a good lecture.

The findings

It appears from literature reviews that the framework for distinguishing a good lecturer from a bad one is reasonably well established. What variation there is within this framework is the degree of complexity and completeness of criteria under specific headings. Fisher *et al.* (1998) provide twenty-one criteria for defining a good lecture. They argue that good lectures should, under four heads, do the following:

Strategy

- present materials in an interesting way;
- act as an academic role model;
- build on students' previous knowledge.

Organisation

- provide clear explanations;
- ensure lecturers have a defined structure;
- provide periodic summaries during the lecture.

Interaction

- stimulate students' interests;

- be paced so as to allow note taking;
- arouse students' curiosity;
- use examples relevant to students;
- stimulate independent learning;
- interact with students;
- challenge students' world views;
- pause to allow memory consolidation;
- project enthusiasm for the subject matter.

Pedagogy

Lecturers should:

- display mastery of subject matter;
- provide up-to-date research;
- possess good public-speaking qualities;
- use non-sexist language;
- display a high level of verbal fluency;
- use inclusive examples and expression.

One interesting feature of Fisher *et al.*'s study is that staff and students were asked to rank, in order of importance, their top ten criteria from the list above. The following gives the results (with the ranking given in brackets).

Student ranking

Strategy

- present materials in an interesting way. (4)

Organisation

- provide clear explanations; (1)
- ensure lectures have a defined structure. (5)

Interaction

- stimulate students' interests; (6)
- be paced so as to allow note taking; (2)
- arouse students' curiosity. (3)

Pedagogy

- display mastery of subject matter; (8)
- provide up-to-date research; (7)
- possess good public-speaking qualities; (10)
- display a high level of verbal fluency. (9)

Staff ranking

Strategy

- present materials in an interesting way. (2)

Organisation

- provide clear explanations; (1)
- ensure lectures have a defined structure. (6)

Interaction

- stimulate student' interests; (3)

- arouse students' curiosity; (4)
- stimulate independent learning; (10)
- project enthusiasm for the subject matter. (7)

Pedagogy

- display mastery of subject matter; (8)
- provide up-to-date research; (9)
- use non-sexist language. (5)

Six criteria were common, including the first: 'provide clear explanation'. However, students tended to stress the importance of performance variables of lecturers, e.g. lecture pace.² Staff in contrast tended to stress learning issues.

Work by Jin (2000) considered three elements in the lecture process: context/image of lectures; style of lecture; and the perception/evaluation of lecturers, which focused primarily on the issues shown above.

Context/image of lecture

Jin found that the perception of usefulness of a lecture depended upon its delivery.

If the lecture is delivered well, students feel it is useful..... It is clear that good lectures, in terms of presentation, can stimulate student learning, whereas poor ones turn students away.

Jin also claims that lecturing can stimulate deep learning.

Some students cannot help but refer to the excitement they feel when being motivated by attending good lectures.

He also argues that the usefulness of lecturing depends on its simplicity and practicality.

Many students like some lectures because they reduce the complexity of the subject so that academic credit can be earned more easily and effectively. The usefulness here is not what they can learn from the module but the reduced time and effort to obtain a degree in an efficient way.

Styles of lecturing

Saroyan and Snell (1997) suggest that lectures fall into the following typology: context driven, content driven, and pedagogy driven. Content-driven lectures aim to cover a large amount of information in the allotted time with few, if any, activities to enhance cognitive processing. Context-driven lectures, although clearly moving beyond content-driven lectures, seek only to use the context information to promote the lecture's objectives. Pedagogy-driven lectures are designed to promote students' application of knowledge during the lecture using a variety of interactive techniques.

From their research they found that pedagogical lectures were the most highly rated by students; content-driven lectures were the lowest rated.

Jin raises a further issue concerning lecture style: he argues that there is a conflict between lectures as education and lecturers as entertainment. The solution to this conflict appears to be knowing your audience. Jin found that motivated students expressed satisfaction with lectures that had an education bias. Whereas less well-motivated students expressed satisfaction with lectures that had an entertainment bias. As Jin remarks:

How a lecturer approaches such a dilemma is critical to the success of student learning. The difficulty lies in how the lecture can stimulate those less interested students without alienating those that are highly motivated.

The perception/evaluation criteria

Jin also discovered from his research that learning support was a very important factor in shaping students' learning experience. He discovered that support for studying was crucial in shaping students' perception of the lecturer and course delivery. Examples of highly-rated study support include:

- a comprehensive and clear module handbook;
- in-depth lecture handouts distributed in class as well as on the intranet or Web;
- lecturer support for individual students, including longer office hours catering for different students' requirements.

Some thoughts and reflections

If I have taken away anything from my reading, it is first: know the students you are teaching and tailor your lecture content and style accordingly. Second, use, develop and embrace the 'pedagogy-driven' lecture style.

I would suggest that the majority of the students on non-economic specialist programmes, tend to fall into the category of 'less well motivated students'. As such, lectures as entertainment rather than as education would in most cases receive expressions of student satisfaction. What are the implications of this? I think the main one is that we should look, wherever appropriate, to enliven the lecture, to make it an experience students might be stimulated by, whether this is in terms of structure and content, presentation or delivery.

The use of PowerPoint presentations in lectures is one simple improvement we might make (and are technologically capable of delivering), and from my experience students are becoming increasingly expectant that this is what they will get. When students are presented with hand-written lecture slides, not only might their eyesight suffer, but perceptions of the lecture and its content might be seriously damaged. But, in terms of presentation, PowerPoint is not enough. The slides must not contain too much information and must not just become a 'lantern show', where students passively watch the colourful screens flash past their eyes. The slides must be used to encourage active learning. For example, the use of half-complete PowerPoint diagrams, which the students must then complete before being shown the completed version, helps to make the learning process an active one.

In an earlier paper on promoting active learning (which can found on this site), a strong case was made to innovate in lectures, not only to entertain but also to help embed knowledge. This research seems to reinforce that view.

Things you might do to embed knowledge during the lecture (and at the same time possibly enhance your entertainment rating!) could include:

- use questions to aid the understanding of the material delivered. Such questions could be of a multi-choice nature, or they could be more discursive and involve problem solving. Ask students to discuss with their neighbours what they know about something before you discuss it. Ask them to consider the relevance of a concept to their own personal experience.
- show a short video clip to illustrate a point. Always discuss with the students what the video had to say and how it underpins or reinforces the lecture material.
- use the lecture hour to run a debate.

- turn the lecture, or a part of it, into a workshop when that might be a more suitable way to deliver the material you wish to convey.³

Whether we like seeing students as ‘customers’ or not, it is increasingly the case that student perceptions of what is good or bad holds sway. If they are customers we should be looking to give them what they demand, but equally we need to temper this with the fact that consumers do not always know what they want or what is good for them!

¹ Fisher, A.T., Alder, J.G. and Avasalu, M. (1998), ‘Lecturing performance appraisal criteria: staff and student difference’, *Australian Journal of Education*, 42(2), pp.153–168

Jin, Z. (2000), ‘The learning experience of students in Middlesex University Business School (MUBS): why do they enjoy some modules/lectures and dislike others?’ *The International Journal of Management Education* Volume 1, Issue 1, November 2000, pp.22–36

Saroyan, A., and Snell, L. (1997), ‘Variations in lecturing styles’, *Higher Education*, 33: pp.85–104

² According to Robinson et al. (1997), the pace of the lecture has a direct impact upon student comprehension. They found that student comprehension and the perceived importance of the information presented in the lecture fell as the lecturing rate increased. A lecturing rate of 100 words per minute (wpm) “will generate higher comprehension and higher perceived values of importance than lecturing rates of 150 and 200 wpm. This suggests, therefore, that college lecturers need to be aware of how their lecturing rates may affect both cognitive and affective outcomes.” Jin (2000) (op. cit.) p25.

³ More information on these points can be found in the ‘Promoting Active Learning’ teaching and learning case study on this site.

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