

EXPLORING THE HISTORY, CURRENT STATE, AND POTENTIAL OF THE TRADITIONAL LECTURE

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a barrage of criticism regarding the use of traditional lecture in the classroom, and calls have been made to replace the antiquated teaching method. While modern teaching approaches are effective, the traditional lecture may still fulfill a critical role in student learning. This roundtable discussion provides the opportunity for undergraduate and graduate educators to learn the history and literature surrounding the decline of the lecture method, understand the current state of the use of the lecture method in management education, and gain confidence in their own teaching style, whether or not it includes the lecture method.

Keywords

teaching style, traditional lecture, active learning

Introduction

A clip of a teacher giving a traditional lecture from the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, 1986): *In 1930, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, in an effort to alleviate the effects of the... Anyone? Anyone? ...the Great Depression, passed the... Anyone? Anyone? The tariff bill? The Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act? Which, anyone? Raised or lowered? ...raised tariffs, in an effort to collect more revenue for the federal government. Did it work? Anyone? Anyone know the effects? It did not work, and the United States sank deeper into the Great Depression. Today we have a similar debate over this. Anyone know what this is? Class? Anyone? Anyone? Anyone seen this before? The Laffer Curve. Anyone know what this says? It says that at this point on the revenue curve, you will get exactly the same amount of revenue as at this point. This is very controversial. Does anyone know what Vice President Bush called this in 1980? Anyone? Something -d-o-o economics. 'Voodoo' economics.*

In recent years, the traditional college lecture method of teaching has developed an exceptionally bad reputation. A mention of the traditional lecture as opposed to active learning in the classroom conjures images akin to the teacher in the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, 1986) who receives no responses from his expressively bored students despite multiple invitations to join the learning conversation in the form of “*Anyone?*”. The traditional lecture is generally described simply as “the professor stand[ing] before a podium and talk[ing]” (Kagan, 2014, p. 120), although harsher definitions have been offered, such as “an uninterrupted discussion by an extremely interested speaker to a relatively uninterested, if not downright apathetic and sometimes hostile group of people” (Odiorne, 1976, p. 7). It has been compared to “the educational equivalent of bloodletting” (Westervelt, 2016). Arguments have been made that the teaching method is in its “twilight” years (Lambert, 2012) and should receive no “Lazarus-

style resurrection” (Fulford & Mahon, 2018). In support of this, faculty professional development programs focus on avoiding the traditional lecture, suggesting instead methods including, but not limited to, active learning, high-impact practices, and team-based learning.

As the promotion of, and evidence for, more engaging alternatives have increased, interest in the traditional lecture has decreased. One particularly well-cited article that has supported the call to end the traditional lecture was conducted by Freeman, et. al. (2014). These authors meta-analyzed 225 studies, specifically comparing student outcomes in classes with some active learning versus classes with traditional lecturing only. Their results concluded that students in active learning classes of a variety of sizes showed increased performance and higher achievement. Moreover, evidence was found that the traditional lecture classes set up students for much more negative outcomes: students in the traditional lecture classes were 1.5 times more likely to fail than those in classes with some active learning.

Any reasonable social scientist would not discount the evidence of the benefits of modern teaching approaches. At the same time, it is difficult to believe that a teaching method that has prevailed, successfully, for thousands of years, both formally and informally, is, in a mere few decades, defunct. Some of history’s greatest teachers—from Socrates and his Socratic method to Martin Luther King, Jr. and his moving speeches—have used a traditional lecture method. In fairness, some authors have offered more tempered opinions on the traditional lecture, arguing not for its extinction but instead for educators to carefully consider what they are teaching before deciding on the best delivery method (Corrigan, 2013; Feden, 2012). But the overwhelmingly negative opinion formed around the traditional lecture in such a short period of time deserves investigation, at the very least.

The purpose of this conference roundtable discussion is not to argue that one teaching method is better than another, nor is it to argue that educators are wrong in their promotion of active learning and other modern teaching techniques. Instead, it is to scrutinize the role that the traditional lecture does—and should—play in the management classroom. Given this aim, the target audience for this roundtable discussion is any management and organizational behavior educator of undergraduate or graduate students, no matter if they employ one or both of traditional lecture and active learning teaching methods, and no matter if they agree or disagree with (or are unsure of) the use of traditional lecture methods. The more perspectives, the better we can all come to understand why the traditional lecture method has developed such a negative reputation, whether the method is appropriate for the management classroom, and if so, how it should be used.

Theoretical Foundation / Teaching Implication

While the clear trend over the past two decades has been a call for less traditional lecturing and more active learning, there are advocates on all sides of the debate. At one extreme exists authors arguing that active learning should replace the traditional lecture. The use of traditional lecture may be a signal that the professor is making a series of faculty assumptions about students and their learning styles, including, but not limited to, students' interest in the topic, ability to maintain attention for long periods of time, skill at listening and notetaking, and assertiveness at asking questions or making comments during the lecture (Svinicki, 1985). Such authors hold a stance that courses with extensive active learning are meaningful to students, they result in better retention, and that traditional lectures are overused (Evans & Omaha Boy, 1996; Feden, 2012; Van Eynde & Spencer, 1988).

At the other extreme are those in favor of the traditional lecture; after all, a traditional lecture “can be very stimulating when well done... provides for the presentation of overviews and new information which may not be available in other formats... [and]... is economical” (Svinicki, 1985, p. 143-144). Gooblar (2019), arguing for efficiency, states that “telling is an excellent method of communicating specific information,” and that sometimes professors need to “take the easiest route from A to B and just tell (i.e., lecture)” students. And it has to be noted that active learning and high-impact practices can be labor intensive, leading to faculty exhaustion (Halonen & Dunn, 2018). Other, often-overlooked advantages to a traditional lecture include students benefiting from hearing content explained from an expert in the field, as well as students experiencing positive emotional contagion after being exposed to a lecturer’s interest in, and enthusiasm about, a topic.

Many authors fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum ranging from active learning to traditional lectures. For example, many have suggested that lectures can be effective if interjected with opportunities for students to engage in processing exercises (Faust & Paulson, 1998; Kagan, 2014). Research from Larson and Lovelace (2013) supports the use of questions during lectures, which although more common among assistant professors, appear to garner more student responses for more experienced, associate professors. This same study also found support for questions during lectures being more effective at engaging students if “carefully crafted” and offered “at critical junctions throughout the lecture” instead of coming from a professor all at once, which may only “stimulate superficial engagement” (p. 116). Similarly, Rasmussen (1987) calls for the first lecture of the term, specifically, to set the tone of the learning environment for students and allow them to see the relevance of what they are learning. He proposes the use of lecture along with pointed questions and a quasi-nominal group approach

to achieve this. Still yet, McCorcle (1980) proposes that students assist in preparing a lecture, as this turns the traditional lecture into a learning activity. Finally, it is also recognized that a simple divide between traditional lecturing and active learning is not realistic, as there are many variables surrounding student success in traditional lecture classes that have nothing to do with the professor or the lecture. For example, students' study habits and learning styles are often not adequately considered in the debate about the teaching style's effectiveness (Schermerhorn, Gardner, & Dresdow, 1992). In sum, to evaluate the potential of a teaching style, many variables about the professor, the students, and the content need to be evaluated.

Session Description

The topic of the role traditional lecture does—and should—play in the management classroom is one that deserves a great deal of discussion, and one on which all educators seem to have an opinion. Because of this, I particularly chose a roundtable discussion format and am expecting a spirited debate and a great deal of participation from all attendees. The timeline for this session is planned as follows:

- 10 minutes to introduce the history and literature surrounding the debate of the role traditional lecture plays in the classroom;
- 5 minutes to briefly share the results of a study (see next paragraph) being conducted by myself on this topic;
- 40 minutes of open discussion facilitated by a set of targeted discussion questions (e.g., What teaching strategies do you use in your classes, and why do you use them? What is meant by “lecture” in the modern day sense; in other words, is it really as straightforward as a professor standing at a podium in front of a classroom as the only speaker for the duration of the class meeting? Should the definition of traditional lecture be edited to fit

modern behavioral interpretations of the practice? Are lectures acceptable in the management classroom? If so, in what capacity (e.g., how often, for what length of time, covering what topics)?);

- 5 minutes drawing conclusions and summarizing takeaways from the session.

To supplement the discussion surrounding the current literature on traditional lectures versus active learning, I plan to share a handout summarizing a quantitative research study (see second bullet point above) I am currently conducting on students' ability to separate their judgment of the lecturer versus the lecture content. If criticisms in the literature of the traditional lecture are examined carefully, a pattern of judgment of the lecturer—not the lecture itself—emerges. Specifically, the lack of oratory skills possessed by the lecturer (Gross-Loh, 2016) is often cited as the reason for lectures being ineffective. Consistent with this, Richards and Velasquez (2014) conducted a study in which they identified a lack of engagement (defined as lectures and instructors not being engaging and material not being relevant) as the top mistake students perceived professors making when in a lecture setting. Other mistakes the authors identified included faculty assumptions related to students' prior knowledge, understanding, and motivation; incomplete explanations; and flawed instructional delivery due to voice projection as well as clarity and tone of speech. This begs the question: is it really the lecture method that should be criticized, or is it particular lecturers choosing an incompatible teaching style for their own personal strengths that is the problem?

Concluding Remarks

This is such an important topic to explore since most professors use some version of the lecture method to some extent in their management classes. This roundtable discussion is an opportunity for management educators to build confidence in their chosen teaching methods as

well as to adopt ideas from others for their classroom. Collectively, we, as management educators, need to understand why the traditional lecture has garnered a negative reputation, whether this pessimistic opinion is deserved, and ultimately the role the traditional lecture method can play—if any—in communicating knowledge to our students.

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