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The Irony of a Well-Presented Lecture

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The Irony of a Well-Presented Lecture

Abstract

"My ultimate goal is for students to become independent learners so that they won't need me or someone like me when they graduate."

Posting about applying flipped instruction in the university classroom from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-irony-of-a-well-presented-lecture/>

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in things

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The Irony of a Well-Presented Lecture

Tony Jelsma

It was at that moment that it became clear to me that what I was doing was not working. I was explaining an important concept in my human physiology class, but I could see that the students were not engaged. I would ask questions based on what I had just said, but would get a minimal response. Did they not understand, or could they not be bothered to respond (or didn't want to risk the possible embarrassment of answering incorrectly)? I think that, after 20+ years of college teaching experience, I'm pretty good at explaining difficult concepts. Although my brightest students were able to incorporate what I said into their body of knowledge, most of them were dutifully taking notes but not really *learning*. For most students, the actual learning did not take place until they were studying for the upcoming test. Sadly, there were always some students who didn't prepare well for the tests, and I always felt discouraged at the missed opportunity to learn the material. Thus, the time in my class was used, not so much for learning but to convey *what* the students needed to learn. Students generally had to learn on their own, outside of the classroom.

I have known for years that lecturing is a poor way to teach but I couldn't tear myself away from the pattern of information transfer that I had honed for so many years. If I understand the concepts and can explain them well, why don't students pick them up more readily? Clearly, an essential aspect of teaching is helping students to understand the material, so the natural way for me was to explain it to them. However, teaching isn't just information transfer; students need to learn the material and learn how to use it appropriately. Moreover, students need to practice what they will be doing when they are assessed. That means they need to practice answering questions. My ultimate goal is for students to become independent learners so that they won't need me or someone

like me when they graduate. Kingdom citizens should be Kingdom learners and teachers, wherever God places them.

After a time of reflection and discussions with colleagues, I determined to flip some of my classrooms. The format of the classes was as follows: I gave the students a set of learning objectives for each chapter, phrased much like short essay test questions. To make their class notes, students had my PowerPoint slides, which were a guide to the topics that we were covering but (intentionally) did not do much explaining. Most of the information needed to be gleaned from the textbook. I divided the class into groups of four, to work together on developing their notes. I was available (and frequently called upon) to explain particular concepts, which I would generally do for the whole class (if one student doesn't understand something, chances are many others don't either).

Using this format, I had students develop the skill of finding answers for themselves, working with others to make notes, and practice the types of questions they would need to answer on tests. None of these pedagogical techniques is original to me. Indeed, I only determined to go in this direction after my frustrations in the past semester and upon reading Linda Nilson's *Specifications Grading*, which outlines a radically different approach to teaching and grading.

How have things gone so far? Overall, I am pleased with the results, although the process has not been without hiccups. It is a joy not to have to call the class to order, because the students know what is expected of them and they get down to work right away. However, the students have not always taken too kindly to the burden of the work being placed on their shoulders. I also need to watch for students who don't engage well in the process. For example, interpersonal skills are important for group learning, but group dynamics can vary, depending on the situation. Moreover, some of them expressed the feeling that they were not learning as well as if I had explained things to them. I was not surprised by this complaint because a **research paper** providentially appeared about that time which demonstrated that a) students didn't like self-directed learning, b) they didn't think they learned as well, but c) they actually did better on tests than students who were taught in the traditional way. Indeed, my tests have been more difficult this year than in previous years, but students are doing better. In many cases, their answers are more detailed than what I provided on the PowerPoint slides.

Does flipping the classroom mean I'm teaching less? At first glance, it may seem that way—but I'm teaching differently. Initially, in preparing materials for a course, I spend considerable time preparing well-defined learning objectives for each topic (these are also adjusted over the course of the semester). During the class period, I'm not spending unnecessary time covering a topic that students can easily grasp for themselves or learn

from others in their group. With this format, students self-identify the topics that are difficult to grasp and I'm available to clarify and correct any misunderstandings. Those difficult topics may vary between students, so I'm giving more individualized attention, rather than a one-size-fits-all lecture. Although I know the material, I still need to keep it fresh in my mind, partly because I'm not in control of the questions that will be asked.

Going forward, I will continue to modify the process. First, I need to do a better job of helping students see from the outset how this is a successful learning strategy. Just because *I am familiar* with the process, doesn't mean that the students are ready to jump in. For many years they have been trained in the traditional way, so they may need some encouragement to change their learning style. Second, I need to be better at identifying and encouraging any student who may struggle with the transition. Over time, however, students will know what to expect from these courses and resistance to this format should decrease.

Why did I entitle this piece "The Irony of a Well-Presented Lecture?" It is becoming apparent that the more clearly we present material, the less students have to work to understand it, and the less they learn. A recent article showed a similar phenomenon. Students in this study were given reading materials, one group in a font that is easy to read, while the other group's materials were in a hard-to-read font. The struggles that the latter group faced in reading the material resulted in significantly improved learning. The authors pointed out that there are limits to this phenomenon. Obviously, learning cannot be made too difficult, to prevent comprehension, but making students work harder on the concepts has clear benefits to the learning process.

Should we become less effective teachers so that learning may increase? Of course not, but we may need to rethink *how* we teach, in order to become more effective at getting students to learn. The focus must be on student learning, rather than presenting information.