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Abstract

Lecture theatres dominate the lives of university academics, administrators, and students. Such basic matters as whether student numbers can increase, or new courses can be set up, or timetable clashes can be avoided, all come down to the nature and abundance of these ubiquitous units of campus architecture.

Dr Earl Bardsley, senior lecturer in earth sciences at the University of Waikato, asks why, in these days of sophisticated communications, tertiary courses revolve around the lecture method of teaching. Lectures have been described as a transfer of information from a lecturer's mind to a student's notepad without passing through the student's brain. Dr Bardsley looks at the reasons we cling to the lecture and suggests more radical alternatives.

Why All The Lecturing & Scribbling Must Stop

Earl Bardsley

This article first appeared in Campus Review, the national higher education newspaper, and is reprinted with permission.

Lecture theatres dominate the lives of university academics, administrators, and students. Such basic matters as whether student numbers can increase, or new courses can be set up, or timetable clashes can be avoided, all come down to the nature and abundance of these ubiquitous units of campus architecture.

Yet the all-pervading influence of the lecture theatre stems only from conservative attitudes which enshrine the lecture as the essential means both for information transfer and generating enthusiasm for the subject matter.

There is a growing number of noteworthy exceptions, but by and large undergraduate teaching still comes down to a lecturer doing something up front and students responding by scribbling notes on pieces of paper.

The rate at which a traditional lecture course is taught is the frequency of lectures multiplied by the amount of information transfer per lecture, with the latter being constrained by the rate at which students can take notes.

It might seem obvious that the advent of photocopying should have eliminated note-taking so that the numbers of lectures per course could be reduced considerably. This in turn should have had a host of follow-on effects including more time available to academics for course development and research supervision, and greater numbers of courses able to be taught in existing suites of lecture rooms.

That there has been little reduction in lecture intensity is related to the curious way of incorporating printing technology into lectures. It is acceptable to provide handout sheets supporting the lecture, but not to make available on paper (or computer) the full verbal and pictorial content of the lecture to the extent that the students would not need to take notes at all.

In this way the note-taking ritual is preserved and the original lecture frequency is maintained. Presumably the token handouts serve to suggest that at least something might have changed in lecturing since the days of Socrates.

The unstated policy of not giving students full course details in take-away form cannot be justified in terms of savings to departmental budgets - students will be more than happy to meet whatever reproduction costs are involved.

Nor are lecturers helping themselves by maintaining the old note-taking process. Some readers might confess to having given bad lectures during bouts of ill health rather than staying home and thereby disrupting the course sequence.

There are other practical difficulties as well. For example, it is not always possible to achieve consistency from one year to the next in the rate at which a course progresses. At its worst this can lead to a frantic rush in

the last lecture to cover an exam question set six months earlier. There is also the problem of those back-row students who are attending your wretched lectures because your course is the only one available for completion of their degree.

Furthermore, there is a strong element of discrimination in the whole concept of the spoken lecture as the essential vehicle of information transfer. What about the students who are also mothers of sick children? And what should students do who are unable to attend lectures because of a timetable clash or because they have to take a job to make ends meet? Then there is the issue of overseas students having extreme difficulty extracting the main points from an oral presentation in a language with which they are not fully conversant.

With so many disadvantages in the traditional system, we should admit the real reason for not providing complete take-away course details is that we know hardly anyone would turn up to our lectures (this in itself speaks volumes about how students would prefer to receive their information). In a system where lecturer "popularity" is equated to class attendances, it is much better for promotion prospects to restrict the handouts and fill lecture rooms to capacity all year with scribbling students.

The time has come to put tradition aside and recognise that we are working in a new economic environment. Students do not pay increasing fees for the "privilege" of hour stints at ballpoint exercise in lecture rooms. They are quite entitled to demand full lecture content in the form of a booklet or whatever is convenient to them. Nor should they be willing to be fobbed off with photocopies of journal articles or textbook pages (with or without copyright clearance). What students require is something which approximates the notes and diagrams they would have created themselves, but in a more detailed and presentable form.

It will be necessary to break through some well established mindsets if elimination of note-taking is to become a reality. University administrators will have to come to terms with the fact that by improving the efficiency of information transfer lecturers can make considerable reductions in lecture frequency while still justifying their salaries. That is, the principle would have to be established that lecturers are paid for presentations of courses rather than for total hours spent in lecture theatres.

Lecturers for their part will have to live with the implication of public availability of every detail of

their courses. Peer review of course content would be a distinct possibility. The reduced staff/student contact time resulting from fewer lectures is likely to be more apparent than real. In the traditional lecture a student's "contact" with the lecturer involves little more than seeing him or her at a distance in the intervals when eyes are raised from the note pad. Interaction at the end of the lecture is quickly terminated by the next mob pouring in for their own scribbling sessions. Worthwhile contact time might be increased if lecture frequency was reduced by half and the remaining sessions spent on interactive discussion of subject matter given out at the start of the course.

One issue that might be raised in favour of the traditional lecture is that some students assimilate material best by the act of writing down the main points as they hear them spoken. We are doing these people no favours by encouraging this mode of learning. The simple fact is that once outside the university the ex-student will seek information and further education mostly from printed words or images of printed words on a computer screen. Dependence on a learning style based on listening and writing can only be a distinct disadvantage in the modern world.

What would happen within a "lecture" under the new system? The old information transfer role becomes redundant, so the time could be used instead for a rapid overview of material which would otherwise have been presented over two or three lectures. It is reasonable to require of students that they take the time prior to such sessions to read through the material and have any questions prepared. Whether they do or not is up to them - they should certainly have time available as their lecture hours would have been considerably reduced. Another possibility for alternative use of time would be to introduce interesting new material related in some way to the course but without being an examinable part of it (the latter requirement is essential otherwise the note-taking will start all over again).

All these developments have been happening in tertiary education on a piecemeal basis for some time, especially in those departments with distance education components. But institution-wide policies are required to significantly reduce both note-taking and lecture frequency on campus.

If the administrators of a university still think that their students want to come to take notes, a rude shock may await when the competition across town advertises complete course contents available to students at the start of the next academic year.