

Michael Yell on Making Every History Lecture Engaging

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The lecture has fallen on difficult times . . . it relies too heavily on auditory input and makes students passive as opposed to active learners.

—Silver, Strong, and Perini [1]

As history teachers we may often use the lecture format, and perhaps many of us had our first excitement about history ignited by an incredible lecture that sparked our interest in the past. But we also know that for an engaging lesson, we need students to be actively involved in that lesson. They must be actively processing what they are hearing. Because interaction and engagement are the climate to set in our history classes, our focus must be on more than teacher-led lectures consisting of just “teacher talk/students listen.” A lot more.

You may have decided that you are going to use a lecture to impart a certain amount of information to your students. And perhaps you have some slides you wish to have them view, so you have created a PowerPoint presentation. Can the lecture be made more engaging? Can the lecture become less a passive imparting of information and more an interactive experience grappling with that information? Absolutely! Incorporating two elements into your lecture will make it interactive and engaging for your students:

1. An introduction that taps into students curiosity, involves them, and grabs their attention; and
2. The use of processing strategies throughout the lecture allowing students to interact with the content, and with each other.

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Beginning the Lecture

To begin with, make the students first encounter with your lecture an interactive encounter. Rather than “Okay, take out your notebooks,” you might choose to begin with a Discrepant Event Inquiry. In this strategy (which my students have always termed their favorite), a puzzling statement or story is presented to students which they must figure out using questions that are answerable with a yes or a no. Questions build upon questions and answers build upon answers as students try to figure out the puzzle. Try beginning a lecture on General U.S. Grant with an inquiry such as *“Although this person failed at much, this person’s successes ensured his success.”*

Or perhaps begin your lecture with a **Media Hook**. In this simple strategy you will select a powerful visual image to show the class. If you have an LCD or Smartboard the image can be made large enough for students to come up and interact with. Imagine the interest generated by beginning a lecture on the Depression with viewing Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother.” Use guiding questions to have students identify specific components of the image.

During the Lecture

During the lecture give students time to review, formulate questions about the ideas, and process.

One quick strategy for processing is a **Think-Pair-Share**. At particular points, stop lecturing and ask an open-ended question about the material that has been covered. Students are given a short amount of time to think about their answer. Students then pair up to discuss their answer, and a brief whole-class discussion ensues. A variation of this is a **Timed-Pair-Share** in which students think about the open-ended question and in pairs take turns discussing their ideas, each for a specified period of time. Another strategy for processing is Spencer Kagan’s **Numbered-Heads-Together**. After numbering off one through four in a group, students put their heads together to discuss. A number is then called; the students with that number in each group must explain their group’s ideas.

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

And if you are using PowerPoint or other presentation programs during the lecture, pause at a picture and discuss it, and/or listen to a recording. Imagine pausing during a lecture on the Civil War to have students listen to a recording of a reading of the *Sullivan Ballou* letter from the soundtrack of Ken Burns's *Civil War* (there are a number of excellent YouTube clips with this letter and accompanying images).

Finally, there are many excellent quick-write strategies that can be used to augment note-taking during the lecture. One excellent example is **Sentence Syntheses**. In addition to inserting within a lecture, it is particularly good for closure. In this quick-write, students construct meaningful sentences on ideas from the lecture, using two or three key terms. They then share these sentences. In a lecture on the Constitution, for example, the teacher might select the words *separation*, *Constitution*, and *branch*. Students must use all three words in a sentence that might come out like this: "**Separation of powers is the principle in our Constitution of dividing powers between the different branches of government.**"

Or you might pause and have students respond to a **Question All Write** (which is exactly what its name states; you as the teacher give your students a question and they all write the answer prior to the classroom discussion). At the end of the lecture, you might ask students to write and share Outcomes Sentences, which, as in a Question All Write, has students responding in writing to a teacher prompt. Students complete the sentence stem *I learned that..., or I still wonder why...*

A lecture need not be a passive experience for students. It can easily become an interactive experience that will engage them in the ideas you are imparting. Give some of these mini-strategies a try in your next lecture.

Bibliography

[1] Harvey F. Silver, Richard W. Strong, and Matthew J. Perin, *The Strategic Teacher: Selecting the Right Research-based Strategy for Every Lesson* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007).

Michael Yell. "Making Every History Lecture Engaging." Teachinghistory.org. <http://teachinghistory.org/nhec-blog/25266>. Retrieved February 13, 2015.