Classroom Instruction: Lecture, Discussion, Videos

**Lecture**
I mentally divide actually classroom instruction into four general categories: lecture, discussion, student presentation, and group activity. These are discussed in other modules, but I would like to touch on the first two categories, which form the bulk of classroom instruction. While you should focus on what you do best, do not shy away from alternative methods.

Different techniques are useful tools at different times. I, for instance, dislike group activity. I never liked it as a student and I’m not particularly fond of it as a professor. And yet on the rare occasion (usually once or twice a semester) when do ask my students to do a group activity, they seem to love it. Other professors love group activity. And once when I was late to class and needed a few moments to get my act together, I made up a group activity on the spot. It worked like a charm.

Lecture is the most old-fashioned and traditional style of teaching. Though often disparaged for exactly these reasons, a good lecture is always appreciated. It is also an art. Lectures are especially appropriate when class size is too large for productive discussion (I would put that number at above 25-30 students). What a class is too large, as many of ours are, even a seemingly good discussion actually only involves a small handful of students. Are the rest of the students even paying attention? Can the even hear what is being said?

When I started teaching in 2004, I didn’t use PowerPoint. This was because when I was a student, I had never seen a PowerPoint I actually liked. I fashioned myself then as a more a chalk-and-blackboard kind of professor. Besides, PowerPoint can overly structure a class and makes it difficult to take alternative routes to the same destination.

One day, perhaps because I hadn’t prepared adequately, I decided to use the prepared PowerPoint provided by the publisher. It covered — rather poorly, I thought — a chapter from an Introduction to Policing textbook. At the end of class I asked the students if they would prefer me to continue to use the book’s PowerPoints on continue in the manner which I had assumed was stellar (if a bit old-fashioned). The class was unanimous in support of the PowerPoint. Yes, literally each and every one of the 32 students. Lesson learned.

Now I rely extensively on PowerPoint. Though not for every class. There is little point to using PowerPoint if I’m hellbent on leading an hour’s discussion. But I do use PowerPoint partly because students expect it and partly because I’m convinced it helps students learn. Also, in place of the whiteboard, I sometimes type in Word during class. It keeps my hands clean and I can type faster than I can write, and the whiteboard doesn’t have spellcheck. And I have bad handwriting.

But I wasn’t completely wrong in my initial assessment of publisher provided PowerPoints. They are generally horrible. Do not read your PowerPoint slides. The slides are meant to supplement your lesson, not be a crutch. Be the Jackie Chan of PowerPoint: make all your own slides. Keep it simple. Keep it visually appealing. Do not be afraid to include pictures or videos. Even if you do use the book’s PowerPoint as a starting point, you can do better by making the presentation look like your own. Avoid background colors and childish transitions.

**Discussion**
Effective discussion can be the most difficult and rewarding teaching method. As an added benefit, a discussion-oriented class can require less prep-work than a well-developed lecture. But relying on discussion to cover for lack of prep can backfire miserably if a teacher rolls the dice that things will
go well and comes up with snake-eyes. Keep this in mind before you convince yourself that student
discussion and presentation should be the bulk of your class: But when is the last time you’ve ever
seen a student take notes on what another student said?

Here are some good tactics to encourage discussion. One tried and true trick is to simply arrange
students in a circle. It works surprisingly well. A circle prevents students from hiding in the back row
and shakes things up a bit in term of the normal classroom environment. It also tells your class that
for this class period, you’re committed to class discussion so they might as well make the best of it.
Plus, when sitting in a circle, it’s easier to learn students’ names (which by all means you should).

To get discussion rolling you can start with a general topic or ask each student, in order, a specific
question. When it goes well, you can sit back as a moderator. But discussion does not always go well.
And then you need a backup plan. Have specific questions ready. Or even a group activity. But don’t
be afraid of long silences. Eventually somebody will speak up. It doesn’t have to be you. Playing a
brief video can be effective to jump start discussion. And keep in mind that it is almost inevitable, in
a “free-flowing” discussion, that a few students will do most of the talking. This isn’t necessarily bad,
but the goal should be more rather than less inclusive participation. Still, if a few students are
respectful and say interesting things, there’s little harm in having them talk the most. Just be sure
they’re not bullying others out of contributing.

One essential part of effective class discussion is students who have done the assigned readings.
Students who have not done the reading will generally remain silent. In my seminar classes, I assign
short reading responses for each class’s readings. This is in lieu of a final exam. The downside, aside
from initial students’ complaints (by the end of the semester most rather like the system), is the time
commitment to read, correct, edit, and grade such assignments. It is more work for me outside of
class, but class time because much easier and more rewarding when students are up-to-date on the
readings.

During discussion, some professors shy away from expressing their own opinion believing it to be
irrelevant to class discussion or an unfortunate way to silence those with alternative opinions. An off-
the-cuff disparaging comment toward Obama, or Al Sharpton, or the police, can go a long way to
poisoning class environment. In a diverse classroom setting, there is no such thing as a universally
held opinion. This is especially true when dealing with New York City students, especially those with
an interest in criminal justice!

But I prefer to be honest about my opinions. Partly this is because I do not believe I can successful
hide them over the course of the semester. And partly I hope students can learn from how I present
my experience and opinions, even if they disagree. Ideally I want students’ opinions to span the
range of possible opinions, but this is not always the case. So I will be quick to play devil’s advocate.

If a student says something inappropriate or offensive, you have a few options: 1) you may say
nothing and hope it’s a one-off (it can be, but rarely is it); 2) you may say something immediately; 3)
you can say something later. Certainly if a comment bothers you, you should say something. If a
comment offends others, you should say something both to the offender or to he or she who might be
offended (though probably not at the same time). This goal isn’t to blame a student but to keep a
situation from getting out of hand or having a student completely disengage. A quiet word to a
student after class, either explaining why what they said is inappropriate or that you sense they were
bothered, can work wonders.
Keep in mind that what some students believe to be commonly held beliefs can be offensive and
wrong. Other times students may be trying honestly to bring up an issue, but lack the politically
correct ways of doing so. Still other time it may be the use of a word such as “bitch” or “nigga.” I
simply tell students not to use the word, even when it is not intended to offend. As to general curse words, they sometimes slip from my mouth, but I enforce a no-swearing policy on my students. When a student uses a bad word (which is inevitable if you use the same word), I simply inform my class not to use word. I acknowledge I do, but I can. Because it’s my class.

Once I had a student, a police officer, say disparaging things about people in public housing. At the time I simply informed him and the class that that “factual” part of his statement wasn’t true. But after class I took him aside and explained that in all likelihood he was insulting people in class who lived in public housing. He didn’t seem to have any idea that kids from public housing could even go to college (police officers who grow up and live in Long Island can have a very limited views of the urban neighborhoods they police). I wasn’t denying what he had seen as a police officer, but I made it clear that such observations were both wrong and offensive when applied to individuals, especially my students.

Other times a student will say good things, but simply talk too much. Of course ”too much” is subjective. You will like students who contribute to class discussion, but once a student dominates the conversation or become too predictable in his or her comments — often the line is crossed when other students begin to roll their eyes — you need to do something. Talk to the student after class and say you need him or her to speak a bit less. Often students who talk too much are simply trying to please.

**Videos**

Showing videos is one of my signature moves as a professor. I play as many five-minute videos as I can (related to the subject matter, of course). I try and play at least one a class, and rarely more than two. My favorites are by comedians Ali G and Chris Rock and also scenes from The Wire. The first time I played videos which included language and subject material I myself would not say in the classroom, I worried about students finding them pointless at best, or offensive, racist, or sexist at worst. More than a thousand students later, I have yet to receive one complaint.

And many students have said it’s their favorite part of my class. This may say more about me than the videos, but either way, I keep showing videos. I try and avoid YouTube videos for tech-related reasons (and because I don’t like ads in a classroom setting). But granted, preparing your own video files takes both work and technical ability. Legally, you are covered by Fair Use. But having your own video files gives you control, does not require an internet connection, and has fewer tech hassles.

When you do use tech, and you should, if at all possible, make sure you things are working before class starts. Nothing sets a worse tone than everybody sitting around in silence when the professor can’t figure out how to get sound working or finds that the video clip won’t play in the selected media player (VLC player is generally your best bet.)

Also, it’s a good rule of thumb to not show any YouTube video you haven’t personally vetted. The one your student recommends *probably* won’t be pornographic, but his or her opinion of “subject-related” may differ significantly from your own.

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