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Lecture Fail?: Students and Teachers Speak

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Lecture Fail?: Students and Teachers Speak

YouTube continues to astonish me. A few years ago, I decided to fulfill a lifelong dream and learn to play the piano. I was amazed to see how many tutorials there are on YouTube: want to learn how to play John Lennon’s “Imagine”? I found four different tutorials at the click of a button. (And I learned to play it, too. Imagine!)

There are videos about college teaching, too. I found an interesting pair from the Chronicle of Higher Education, the first one called “Lecture Fail? Students Share Their Critiques of College Teaching.” Here is the link if you want to watch this short video (2:27): [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBwiX8EwBGs&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBwiX8EwBGs&feature=relmfu)

Their common complaints: lectures are boring. Professors merely read PowerPoint presentations. Really engaging lectures are rare. Students tune out when professors share their life stories. (That one shocked me; I wonder if this would be a common student reaction.) The others did not surprise me at all. I know how I react when I am in a meeting or at a conference and the presenter merely reads a PowerPoint. I can also remember being a student, sometime during the Dark Ages, and enduring professors who plodded in a droning monotone through the material, day in and day out. (I had a graduate seminar so bad that several of us had to hit the campus pub beforehand to fortify ourselves against the three hours of dull that our eminent professor subjected us to.) I share the experience of those students in the video, that an engaging lecture is rare, something to be held in memory.

And then there is a companion video, “Lecture Fail? Professors Push Back.” Here is the link for this three-minute video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3_9uhFPNq4&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3_9uhFPNq4&feature=relmfu)

I must say that I was more than taken aback at some of these responses, especially the professor who said, “You’re free to complain, you’re free to be bored, you’re free to fail.” Wow. I would be tempted to say to her, “And you’re free to find a job where you don’t treat people with such outright contempt.”

I’m sure she doesn’t mean it this way, but it sounds like she is saying, “I’m going to be boring, and you’re just going to have to take it.” The other responses were not as negative as hers, but none of them seemed to take any responsibility for capturing students’ interest. Does teaching and learning have to be a mind-numbing, boring slog through three months of material?

The only solution the students suggest is that we use more social media. I know that the use of texting and Tweeting in class can be powerful and engaging; Marshall Jones in the College of Education gave a dynamic and interesting TLC session on the topic,
“Using Smart Phones to Get Smarter,” which you can find on the TLC Resources page: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/New%20Design/resources_mainpage_old.htm

Some of the professors in the second video rightly complain that students share some of the blame, that they need to be more prepared, that they need to be more engaged. I have made these complaints myself, many times.

But I think both the students and the professors (especially the professors, I hate to say) are missing the point, and missing some solutions. The students are bored, and the professors seem not to care that much about it.

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flushes back 35 years or more, to the days when I was an undergraduate, preparing to be a teacher. I sat through some classes that were so vibrant and interesting that they still shine in my mind. I sat through many, many more that were more painful than dental work or ditch digging. I vowed to myself, then and there, that I would never, ever bore my students—unless it was absolutely necessary. (I gave myself that out, knowing that there are times when you do have to slog through the mud or undergo dental surgery or dig a ditch—but I also found that even teaching subject-verb agreement can be interesting.)

What was the key? I found, early on in my career, that it began with one person: me. If I was interested in the topic and in the students, no matter what the topic was, no matter who the students were, the topic would be interesting and the students (or most of them) would become interested. Enthusiasm is infectious, and even the most resistant student is bound to catch it, eventually. I also made a vow, a few years ago, that the day I walk into the classroom and don’t feel excitement and enthusiasm and interest in the course and in the students is the day I will start thinking about retiring. That day has not come yet.

Those are my honest and personal reactions to these videos about our profession. I would be very interested to hear the reactions of others.
Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/ Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu

Join XXITE 2.0 or Register for a TLC Session At www.winthrop.edu/tlc

The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don’t want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Thought for The Week

“I most cordially hate the lecture-field. And, after all, I shudder to think that I may never get out of it.”
--Mark Twain