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When Good Discussions Go Bad

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Blog Series: 12 Surprises When Lecturing Less

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Tags: classroom management | course design | discussion

The main reason I don't lecture is cowardice, plain and simple. I have never felt brilliant or knowledgeable or charismatic enough to carry a course on my own. Thankfully, though, I teach in a small department in a small institution where I have the luxury of small classes, so my



weakness is not as much of a liability here as it might be in a larger program. I trust, though, that every weakness can also be a strength. The upside of my reticence is that I can happily relinquish control over the classroom without undue anxiety about how things might turn out (in contrast to my doctoral advisor, who used to say provocatively to a lecture hall full of eager divinity students on the first day of class, "You don't have minds worth making up").

But I confess, the results of not lecturing can sometimes be disastrous. As everyone reading

this knows, there are people who don't read. There are people who read but don't talk. There are people who don't read but will gladly take up an entire class period with their deep thoughts if no one else steps in to fill up the gaps. There are even men who don't enjoy women professors and vice versa. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/10/opinion/one-classroom-two-genders.html?nl=opinion&emc=edit_ty_20130910] Such factors often lead to awkward class periods or entire awkward semesters which, at their worst, can feel a bit like being on a blind date with 25 surly, sleepy



strangers with whom I have nothing in common.

In such cases, I'm sorry to say, I do sometimes find myself "lecturing"... not necessarily about the day's reading, which would be bad enough, but about why they should read, talk, and stay awake in class - in short, why they should care. It's not pretty. My worst moment, at least the worst one I'm willing to confess here, was probably when I told a class that they were boring and then left early. Had I simply planned a good lecture that day, their status as bores would have been, if not irrelevant, at least less deadly.

On better days, I am comfortable "sanctioning the silence" [http://chronicle.com/article/Sanctioning-Silence-in-the/141369/?cid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en] and letting them squirm a bit. Another favorite go-to is to give them a question to write about for a few minutes, and then make them share their thoughts. Sometimes I make them stand up and stretch, maybe walk across the room to talk to someone they don't know about a given topic as if they were at a cocktail party. And on a few occasions I have asked them, point blank, what's up. "What's wrong with you guys today?" ("We're tired!") "Why aren't you engaged in this conversation?" ("The book is *hard!*") In every case I am improvising, based on what little I know of the complicated human beings in front of me.

In other words, there is no easy fix for when discussions flop. Sometimes discussions or entire courses are just bad; the chemistry is off, maybe, or it's at 8:30 a.m., and there's just no obvious way to undo the badness. When that happens, I continue to go into class prepared, with as much energy as I can muster. Then I remind myself that it's *their* class, not mine, so it's up to them to make it good.



<https://wabash.center/2013/10/when-good-discussions-go-bad/>