The Lecture Revisited: Open Educational Resources and Digital Lessons in Teaching

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Is there any form of teaching more reviled today than the lecture? This presentation addresses the nature and uses of lecturing, featuring attention to how it appears in the new context of Open Educational Resources (OER). With opportunities to observe lecturing via new media we can investigate its operations in order to appreciate its durability. The presentation, intended for teachers, course designers, programmers, and others interested in the forms of OER, argues that making the lecture a subject of study displays a more variable view of online teaching and learning than current educational opinion allows, and also prompts attention to questions of academic identity in the digital age.

After an introduction the presentation first offers an account of the debate about the role of the lecture in postsecondary teaching. It features an historical framework for probing how professors capitalize on its expressive and epistemic features. There follows consideration of Yale’s open online courses. The third section considers Michael Sandel’s acclaimed Harvard course, “Justice,” an anticipation of the MOOC before the form was named and now an edX offering. A brief conclusion reasserts what can be learned about the lecture from Sandel’s course, and suggests how lecturing in OER influences the ways the faculty understands itself in the context of its increasingly digital work.

Speech, Writing, and Lecturing

It may surprise most observers of the digital transformation of education to know that there is a debate about lecturing, however much it has been dismissed in recent accounts of postsecondary teaching and in new electronic initiatives. In announcing the formation of Coursera, Stanford’s Daphne Koller (2011) promised “personalized computer-mediated teaching.” She added: "Lectures came about several hundred years ago when there was one copy of the book, and the only person who had it was the professor. The only way to convey the content was for the professor to stand at the front of the room and read the book. One would hope that we had better capabilities these days.” Koller joined Harvard physicist Eric Mazur’s celebration of the “The Twilight of the Lecture” (Lambert, 2012). Still, for University of Virginia English professor Mark Edmundson (2012) lectures can represent what is most important about teaching. At their best they “use something tantamount to artistry,” and they can, Edmundson believes, “create genuine intellectual community” even in a large and seemingly impersonal teaching space.

Critics of the lecture invariably rely on the case against it in the movement toward “learner-centered” teaching as it gained force in the 1990s, with the now frequently cited admonition that professors refrain from being the “sage on the stage” and instead cultivate skills as “guides on the side.” Even so, the lecture is still recognized as a fruitful form of instruction. Ken Bain’s influential What the Best College Teacher Do (2004)
includes acknowledgment of lectures as legitimate instances (with other classroom methods) of the creation of a “natural critical learning environment.” Thus, in listening to an effective lecturer students can “make improvements while thinking.” Protest against the change in pedagogical methods reflects more than simple nostalgia (e.g., O’Conner, 2007; Aveni, 2014).

Digital technologies and the growth of online teaching have created new conditions for lecturing, and “lecture capture” is now a convention of the electronic classroom, in hybrid and fully online courses. While a functional format for institutions eager to move to online courses and programs, the limits of “lecture capture” (and allied methods) are revealed by what can be accomplished in the MOOC and other forms of OER, whatever leading educational entrepreneurs may say about the demise of traditional instructional discourse.

Since they rely so much on the video lecture MOOCs are an unlikely place from which to display contempt for the form. Koller, a distinguished computer scientist as well as online entrepreneur, shows only limited understanding of the history and epistemology of the lecture. Recognizing its development from a medieval role in preserving and transmitting texts, to its transformation in the late 18th century into a form of exposition and commentary, is essential to seeing how it “enacts” and “performs” knowledge (Friesen, 2011). In effect, the lecture manages one of the oldest of philosophical and pedagogical problems, the relations of speech and writing (Brent, 2004). At its best and in contemporary digital terms, the lecture shows its flexibility and adaptability across media in the transmission and circulation of knowledge.

OER at Yale

Theories of teaching and learning abound but it has been difficult to study public cases. We have lacked complete video and audio records of lectures presented as regular features of courses, though we have accounts by scholars of compelling teachers (e.g., Epstein, 1981).

Resources for research on university teaching have increased dramatically with the advent of OER. Media attention to Coursera and its pronouncements about the academic lecture has obscured the example of Open Yale (oyc.yale.edu) and its 42 courses taught by some of the University’s most highly regarded professors, with millions of viewers worldwide. At Open Yale the student is a viewer and listener, though a transcript is available for each class session.

Presumably, the founders of Coursera and the other influential providers of MOOCs, see Open Yale’s courses as precisely the form of online teaching they are seeking to overcome. There are important differences, chiefly in the fact that Yale’s lecturers have an actual audience, although Edmundson believes it adds little to the experience of the online viewer. The Coursera instructor looks only into a camera. Other differences reflect Coursera’s wish to have networked “learning communities” of registered students complement the instructor’s presentations, now offered in “segments” to address well known problems of online attention. But recent research shows that we may underestimate the impact of the video lecture, particularly when students find unexpected if silent interaction in their encounters with distant speakers (Adams, et al, 2014).
“Justice” for All

Sandel’s “Justice” resembles the OpenYale courses in that it was recorded in a live classroom with students. The ornate location no doubt adds to what students see as the elevated subject matter and significance of the course, the famed Sanders Theater framing the lecturer with signs of Harvard’s age and stature. Yale’s elegant classrooms have an allied effect, hard to match for the typical MOOC teacher, recorded often in an office setting or a “set” that can fairly be described as artificial.

Sandel is, of course, a highly regarded scholar of political philosophy who has made the course a reflection of his scholarly preoccupations. The appeal of his lectures derives in part from the dialectical structure of his thinking, or his way of framing problems as debates between competing interests and positions.

This presentation features Sandel’s formal and informal speech in class, his exposition of required texts, and his uses of video, slides and other visual resources. There are also his interactions with students—perhaps a surprising feature of a lecture course--and possible only in the live format of Open Yale and “Justice.” In addition, the presentation includes attention to readings for the course, and then study guides prepared for the video and online versions.

There is by now ample testimony of the impact of “Justice.” For example, a recent student said it was a course “where I felt comfortable changing my mind, not just once, but a lot of times. I really, really liked having to live in the uncomfortable space of not knowing.”

The presentation explores these themes in Sandel’s lecturing and interactions with students: 1) Text and Talk: The syllabus for “Justice” includes reading of demanding texts. Sandel’s treatment of them in class reveals how text is made into talk in a lecture through exposition, comparison, and commentary, often, in Sandel’s case, with attention to everyday life; 2) Two Conversations: According to Friesen (2011) “The lecture transforms the artifact of the text into an event—an event in which the text is brought into conversational relationship with the audience and the present.” In Sandel’s teaching he organizes a conversation across time between competing political philosophies. But he is mindful too of how the political and philosophical conversation appears within the structure of the implicit conversation he is seeking with students, however much the lecture itself might suggest that they are having only the most limited of interactions with the readings and Sandel’s speech. The course evaluations record high levels of student “engagement.” The presentation explains how that comes about as a result of Sandel’s manner, and how it is made convincing on screen; and 3) Reprise, Repetition, Anticipation, and Completion: After the content, there are the features of Sandel’s spoken style that give his lectures form and direction, or an instructional rhetoric, to use an old fashioned term for what is now a digital practice. In effect, the qualities can be seen as variations on the elements of what Bain calls “Good Talk.” Bain avoids the theoretical vocabulary of communications studies but this presentation proposes that such work (e.g., Brent 2005) can help to identify what is common to the traditional and the online lecture and, indeed, what claims can be made on behalf of online lecturing, to the degree that it is done with awareness of its strengths and limits, for meeting high standards of interactive discourse.
Conclusion: OER, Teaching Old and New, and Academic Identities

Sandel has said that he doesn’t believe “it’s possible to fully replicate the in-person classroom experience using new technology but one goal of [my] project is to see how close we can come.” This presentation argues that “Justice” can be a timely example of what is possible in combining our oldest and newest forms of teaching and learning.

But there is more to Sandel’s digital and OER example than his pedagogical method. The presentation closes with attention to an allied theme signified by a recent study of the impact of our “brilliant technologies” on all forms of contemporary work (Byrnjolffsson and McAfee, 2014). What will be the case in academic life? A timely account of the making of a MOOC offers valuable evidence for professional reflection on faculty work in the digital age, including the place of the video lecture. Thus, “scaling up to MOOC size is only going to increase levels of complexity and paradox.” Accordingly, “troublesome and challenging aspects of the relationships between students, teachers, institutions, disciplines, and professions should be at the forefront of discussions about MOOC pedagogy” (Ross, et al, 2014).

The presentation invites participants in the conference session to revisit the lecture in online teaching and to consider OER as a location for scholarly and scientific instructional discourse in a new medium, with what that can mean for the revision of academic identities.

**References**


