

Lecture or Discussion?

Rawatee Maharaj-Sharma

In most teacher education programmes, teachers are warned against giving lectures all the time. However, it is important to remember that in any typical classroom there is a time and a place for a good lecture. My experience has shown that many conventional lectures could benefit greatly from the addition or inclusion of some probing questions at selected points in the lecture. These questions would not only break the monotony of a traditional lecture but could also lead the class into an interesting whole-group discussion.

The lecture as a method of teaching is characterised by an instructor/teacher as the central focus of information transfer, with the instructor/teacher typically standing before a group of students presenting information for them to learn. Usually, very little interaction occurs between the teacher and the learners in this method of teaching. While this might be a straightforward way of imparting a great deal of information to students relatively quickly, and may appeal to auditory learners and learners who are good note takers, students who are weak note takers often have great difficulty understanding what is being said, and even greater problems deciding what they should remember or write down. In addition, those students who are visual and psychomotor learners quickly lose interest in a forty-minute lecture and may be the ones to complain about classes of this type being boring.

With a little teacher creativity and some pre-planning time and effort, it is not difficult to transform a teacher-controlled, boring lecture into an engaging and interesting whole-group discussion. Whole-group discussion is a modified form of a classroom lecture where the focus is shared between teacher and students, and where there are substantial meaningful interactions between teacher and students and among students themselves. Students participate by answering questions, asking questions, sharing their experiences and prior learning, and by giving examples. This method provides excellent opportunities for teachers to gauge the level of students' understanding and retention through questions posed during the learning process. This method of teaching allows for outspoken students to feel more comfortable—as they can ask questions to clarify their understanding—but it may be intimidating for those students who are intrapersonal learners and those with reserved personalities. It is very important, however, to remember that for the whole-group discussion to be successful in the classroom, ground rules for student participation and involvement must be established in advance. These rules must be adhered to during the learning process because it is very easy for a discussion to go off-topic if the ground rules are not enforced during the discussion.

The choice of teaching method adopted in the classroom ultimately lies with the teacher and ought to be informed by several things, inclusive of, but not limited to, the topic of the lesson, the length of the teaching session, the time of the day, the physical infrastructure, and the resources available to teachers. Far more important than any of these, however, the choice of teaching method should be influenced largely by the nature, levels, abilities, and, most importantly, the needs of the students in the classroom. Lectures are only one tool in a teacher's inventory of teaching strategies and, as with all other tools, it should be used only when it is most appropriate. The onus is on teachers to provide their students with note-taking tips and skills if they are using the lecture as a teaching method. Similarly, depending on the needs of the class, whole-group discussions are an excellent classroom strategy when used in conjunction with other strategies; however, teachers must be competent in diverse questioning techniques and must be good at managing and facilitating discussions. Wait time [elapsed time between a teacher-initiated question and student response or another teacher-initiated question] is also a very important consideration when managing whole-group discussions.

The traditional mode of delivery has been the lecture because, logistically, a lecture is easier to plan than other methods of instruction. As a result, most college and university courses in the past had been predominantly lecture-based courses. This means that teachers themselves have experienced learning by this method and the shift to diverse methods of delivery is not always an easy one for them. The challenge therefore is for teachers to be reflective and innovative in their pre-planning and in classroom enactment. This is very important because educators at all levels have realised that the classroom is a diverse environment, and that instruction should be varied from day to day to help reach, if not all, as many students as possible.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine