

The Sad Disappearance of the Lecture

The lecture format is being abandoned by many college professors. This phenomenon is due to a number of factors: the pressure of teachers to entertain students, the imposition of the scientific method onto the humanities, and an increased preference for “active learning” methods.

But in a [New York Times article](#) this past Sunday, Dr. Molly Worthen of the University of North Carolina explains that giving up on the lecture is shortsighted:

“In the humanities, there are sound reasons for sticking with the traditional model of the large lecture course combined with small weekly discussion sections. Lectures are essential for teaching the humanities’ most basic skills: comprehension and reasoning, skills whose value extends beyond the classroom to the essential demands of working life and citizenship.”

According to Worthen, lectures teach students “the art of attention,” how to build an argument, and how to synthesize as they listen. This last skill, she say, is especially learned through the art of note-taking.

I tend to agree with Dr. Worthen about the enduring value of lectures. Most of the group work I was subjected to in college was inane, and classrooms heavy on discussion were inevitably dominated by students who were bold in their ignorance. During both my undergraduate and graduate years, my feeling was that I was paying \$1,000 per credit to listen to an expert in the field, not my peers. Like most students, my time in class added up to about nine hours each week. That left plenty of time for lengthier discussion with my fellow students *outside of the classroom*.

Plus, I have always found absurd the idea that listening to a lecture amounts to “passive learning.” For me, listening to a good lecture involved actively thinking about the connections

being made by the professor and attempting to summarize them in my notes.

If you can't do this – if you can't sit still for an hour and listen to a lecture – you probably don't belong in a college classroom.