Lecturing and teaching large groups

Introduction and overview of topic

Lecturing is still a predominant teaching method in higher education, reinforced no doubt by the pressure to increase student numbers. It is assumed to be a very efficient method of transmitting information, but it is essential to look deeper than this and consider how effectively the messages are received, and what is in fact achieved in terms of learning. In the 1980s there was a strong movement against lecturing, and an extreme position is set out in Gibbs's Twenty terrible reasons for lecturing (Gibbs, 1982). The emphasis now tends to be on how to use the method more appropriately and the importance of learning the special skills of doing it well for those parts of courses and teaching sessions when it is positively and appropriately selected as a teaching method.

The focus of your attention in planning your lectures and larger group sessions needs to be on the students and their diverse styles of learning. You need to think about how to plan and present your material to enable them to engage with it in the session, rather than simply concentrating on subject matter to be covered. This fundamental principle was emphasised in the introductory programme and informs the Teaching and Learning in HE study pack.

Stanford University’s website hosts a handbook for lecturers, containing a useful section on lecturing, including practical ideas for encouraging active student learning and examples from different subject areas. It defines the goal of lecturing as:

- to illuminate a topic, not to baffle students with its nuances or to overload them with information (Stanford University, online).

It also quotes Professor David Kennedy's summary:

if you have been successful in a lecture, you have done three things. First of all, you have imparted some useful information. Secondly, you have guided your auditors into some future (we hope) long-term engagement with a subject that's dear to your heart. And thirdly, you've left some food for thought on the table. You haven't presented such a completely closed circle of knowledge and data that there is no purchase on it other than to simply digest it. (Stanford University, online).

We would add to this that the lecture must be an effective piece of communication and interaction with the recipients.

This study pack is designed to help you:

- take account of the needs of students as learners in preparing and delivering your teaching to large groups
- plan your teaching of large groups to maximise students' learning both during and following the session
- structure and signpost your lectures so as to help students gain an overview and retain important principles
As your learning from the pack begins to feed into your wider teaching activity, you will have the opportunity to:

- use the lecture method appropriately
- implement a strategy for improving your skill in delivering lectures
- design active learning experiences for large groups
- manage interactivity in large group teaching situations

Even in the most practically based subjects you will almost certainly need to give lectures, and this may indeed be a very substantial element of your teaching. It is important to develop the skills and above all the confidence to do it to a reasonable standard. You are unlikely to become an excellent lecturer overnight. The important thing is to learn from your own and your colleagues' practice and to use all available means of developing your skills.

Many of the activities in this pack are based on *Giving a lecture: from presenting to teaching* (Exley & Dennick, 2004). This text has been chosen because it applies many of the findings of research in this area. You can access it online via Myilibrary, and via the following link (you will need to use your staff/student login and password when prompted to access it off campus):

You should start by completing Activities 1 and 2, and then select from the remaining activities whichever ones are most useful to you at this stage.

**Benefits and weaknesses of lecturing**

**Activity 1**

**Note down briefly** your responses to the following questions:

1. Reflect on your own learning from lectures as a student. Who were your most effective lecturers? What qualities did they have in common? What did some of your lecturers do which made it hard to learn from their lectures?

2. What factors tend to inhibit effective learning in lectures and large groups?

3. What ways can you identify of counteracting or minimising these factors?

A favourite quote used by George Brown is:

> The decrying of the wholesale use of lectures is probably justified. The wholesale decrying of the use of lectures is just as certainly not justified.  
(Spence 1928, quoted in Brown, G., 1978: 41)
Peer observation of lectures
In the early stages of developing or improving your lecturing skills it can be particularly useful to observe an experienced colleague. Just a reminder that you are required to carry out two peer observations for your portfolios for each module of the PGCert course (one observing, and one being observed), so you may want to select a lecture session for that activity.

Preparation
When you are new to teaching large groups there is a strong tendency to spend an excessive amount of time preparing each lecture, and you may not feel easy about asking for guidance from colleagues: in our experience the actual process of preparing sessions is something which is very little talked about. It is also rare in universities for the teaching of an entire course to be designed by a team, and the planning carried through to the content and process. This may happen for a course which needs to be available for a number of staff to pick up and teach, for example courses to enhance the mathematical skills of Year 1. This kind of approach is also the basis of the high quality courses designed by the Open University, whereas for the new lecturer in most universities, preparing teaching is often a matter of trial and error. However, there is some very useful guidance available, both generic and with subject-based examples, which can help you to work towards the approach that suits you and which makes more efficient use of precious time.

Activity 2
1. Read the following page from the University of Stanford’s Center for Teaching and Learning website: . You may also want to refer to their ‘Checklist for Effective Lecturing’, at:
2. Read Gibbs’ Twenty terrible reasons for lecturing (). This is a classic and you are invited to read its views as a basis for helping you to formulate your own ideas on the educational value of lecturing as a teaching method.
4. In the context of your discipline what are you views on the following questions:
   - What are lectures good for?
   - What are lectures not good for?
5. Identify 3 ways of improving your lectures and/or making them more interactive
The following activity should help to increase your awareness of the processes you use to assemble and select material and think about pacing and activities. You will also find it useful to refer back to the examples on the Stanford University webpages.

**Activity 3**

1. Read pages 18-29 in Chapter 2 of Exley and Dennick.

2. Take a forthcoming lecture or content-based teaching session which you need to prepare, and apply the principle of planning content and structure in tandem. Follow the bullet-point list on pages 21-22 and note the time that you actually spend at each stage in preparing.

3. When you give the lecture, monitor your sense of how the session works, from the point of view of how you feel about the structure, process and selection of key points, and from the point of view of how the students respond and the evidence you can glean of their learning.

   With this background, and if you feel it appropriate, you might broach with your colleagues the question of just how they set about preparing sessions.

**Stimulus and structure**

**Activity 4**

1. Read Chapter 4 in Exley and Dennick, and reflect on your own practice and compare it with the guidance offered. For example:
   - How do you gain students' attention?
   - What type(s) of structure do you tend to use for your lectures?
   - How do you plan to draw on the advice and information in the chapter?

**Active learning**

One of the main criticisms of lectures in HE is the tendency for students to be only passively engaged, listening and taking notes, but possibly not actively creating meaning for themselves. To complement the challenge to lectures exemplified by Gibbs's paper, innovative methods have been devised to help enliven student learning in the context of large group lectures, starting with *53 interesting things to do in your lectures* (Gibbs et al., 1992) which is still worth consulting.
**Activity 5**

1. Read Chapter 6 in Exley and Dennick

2. Identify three methods to experiment with in your own lectures

3. Make notes for each on what you aim to achieve by your choice of methods, and plan in detail how you will manage the processes. It is vital to work this out thoroughly from the point of view of practicalities and the learning that you want the students to derive from it. Try to anticipate how it will work in practice and how you will deal with the responses from the students. However well planned, it will be an experiment and you should not expect 100% success at the first attempt. You need to be prepared to continue experimenting.

4. Continue your notes by reflecting on each method, what worked, how you might improve it, and reflect on the learning you observed taking place (insofar as one can observe learning). How effective did you feel the session was with the benefit of the interactivity compared to your experience of giving a straight lecture involving minimal interaction with the students?

**Blended Learning**

You can engage in Blended Learning (BL) by integrating face to face lectures with online activities in studentcentral. Your lecture notes should be uploaded into studentcentral to support the diversity of students and comply with the minimum requirements. You could consider posting activities and reading for students to do in preparation for your lecture or follow up online activities after your lecture. These could be discussions or quizzes.

Some courses are using software such as Camtasia, which allows you to capture and record a lecture over your powerpoints and load it onto studentcentral for students to view in their own time, freeing up contact time for other activities. You could use PollEverywhere which enables interaction with students using mobile phones for texting. Information Services runs a range of training for staff, including on using Camtasia and PollEverywhere.

**Handouts**

**Activity 6**

1. Read chapter 7 in Exley and Dennick and consider the role of handouts in supporting student learning in your teaching.

You may also find pages 100-104 of Race’s *Lecturer’s Toolkit, The: A Practical Guide to Assessment, Learning and Teaching* useful (Race, 2006; also available as an e-book in myilibrary).
Presentation skills
We touched on presentation skills during the introductory days to the course, but it is useful to consider further the physical aspects of managing your own delivery: projecting your voice, breathing, managing tension, avoiding distracting mannerisms, etc.

Activity 7
1. Read chapter 5 of Exley and Dennick and reflect on your progress in developing your presentation skills.

Trouble-shooting
Coping with student behaviour in lectures is an issue, particularly for new lecturers. There is a great deal of scope for disruption especially in the rather impersonal setting of the large lecture room. Many new lecturers are taken aback by some students' apparent lack of motivation and lack of courtesy, and it is indeed a real challenge to engage all the individuals in a large class. Exley and Dennick have some suggestions for how to handle behaviours which disturb you and/or other students and they offer some analyses of the possible effects of different ways of tackling the problems.

Activity 8
1. Read chapter 3 and identify three principal causes of concern to you in your teaching and reflect on how you go about dealing with them. As well as making notes, you may find it helpful to discuss your thoughts with other members of the PGCert, especially your action learning set.

References and further reading
Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2011) Teaching for Quality Learning at University: what the student does. 4th ed. [electronic resource]. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Available at: (this links via the library catalogue where you need to follow the “text online” link to view the ebook).
[The 3rd edition of this text is also available as an ebook]

Gibbs, G. (1982) *Twenty terrible reasons for lecturing*. Oxford (SCEDSIP Occasional Paper 8). Also available online at:


Gibbs, G. & T. Habeshaw (1992) *Preparing to teach: an introduction to effective teaching in higher education*. 2nd ed. Bristol: TES Ltd. (particularly chapter 2). Now available as a pdf online at:


Stanford University, (nd) *Teaching at Stanford: an introductory handbook for faculty, academic staff teaching, and teaching assistants. [online]*; available at

All weblinks in this document were checked 23rd September 2015.