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Reflections on Pedagogy for Large Lecture Humanities Courses

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Large Lectures as a Commons

Abstract:

In this short essay, lecture technique used by Professor Michael Sandel is adapted to the task of shaping productive lectures in a large lecture course in the humanities, here literature. A brief discussion of Sandel's method distills it into four points. A brief example follows.

Overview of the Problem

Our FLC community addressed the problem of teaching the humanities in large lecture courses, a challenge some of us saw as only marginally more hopeful than the ancient project of squaring the circle, or the early modern one of using lances to conquer windmills. But saner and more optimistic voices prevailed and rallied around the banner of exploring the 'affordances' of the large lecture courses; that is, rather than complaining about what they prevent, what if we explored what they allow? That is the spirit of this assignment. Yet, as every teacher knows, the lecturer must conspire to work against the innately numbing effects of monologue. "Lecture" has pejorative connotations for reasons beyond the endemic anti-intellectualism of American culture. Extended listening can induce near comatose slumber. How can we avoid that? One approach is to frame the lecture as a commons, where the project of caring about human values through humanist inquiry becomes a shared experience.

Two Visions of the Lecture: Induced Coma or Drama of the Marketplace of Ideas

When I tried to look at large lecture pedagogy through the lens of what it affords, I began by thinking of the lectures that registered to me as most successful. Among many candidates, I settled on the annual Reith Lectures, which are commissioned by the BBC, delivered to a live audience, and broadcast over BBC Radio 4. In 2009, Professor Michael Sandel of Harvard delivered a four part Reith lecture series entitled "A New Citizenship: A Politics for the Common Good," which struck me as a model of how to frame humanist inquiry in a dynamic way before a large audience. Sandel is a teacher of legendary excellence. His course on justice is one of the most over-subscribed in Harvard's history. Over 15,000 students have taken it. Listening to the Reith lectures, one can see why; he is a master teacher with a talent for *dramatizing* the intellectual positions that define a landscape of debate or exchange. How does he do it?

The signal feature of his pedagogy is this: Sandel builds his lectures around multiple points of contact with his audience. For example, in a lecture exploring the idea that markets might be used to enshrine our moral ideas, Sandel asks the audience a question of the form: "Who here believes that salaries for work to which we attach high moral or societal value ought to be greater than salaries paid to work of lesser moral or societal value? In other words, who thinks that say, nurses or teachers should be paid more highly than stock-brokers?" (It is characteristic of his questions that they are straight-forward, and jargon-free. A complex question will often be restated in simpler form.) When members of the audience raise their hands to vote, the

whole lecture hall gets an instant picture of where people stand. Sandel then calls on a few and asks them to explain their view—sometimes also calling on non-voters to ask why they abstain. He then asks, “Who here has doubts about that view or thinks it might be wrong?” A similar vote is taken, and exponents are asked to briefly explain their view. Sandel then masterfully ushers these audience remarks toward the vocabulary of established intellectual debate, then asks exponents of one view to address arguments given by exponents of the other view. As his lecture proceeds, he accumulates complexity and nuance, adding qualifying arguments, additional thinkers, etc. Each of these moves is generally attended by a new round of vote-taking in the audience, and a fresh round of advocacy from audience members.

The apparent simplicity of Sandel’s pedagogy masks a deeper complexity; he has figured out how to adapt the techniques of a seminar to a large lecture (an audience of hundreds). The result is a highly engaging lecture. Brain scans confirm what any teacher knows, which is that dialogue produces much greater mental activity than does monologue. Of course, dialogue also hails students as thinking agents possessed of rational faculties and discernment—a value of increasing importance. By finding multiple points of contact between the conceptual milestones or cruxes of his argument and the audience, Sandel manages to repeatedly stimulate that greater mental activity and preserve much of the spirit of dialogue within what is after all a very finely crafted lecture. A mark of his craftsmanship is that the whole thing ends up feeling improvised simply because, at several key junctures, it is. Rather than a somnambulant death march through arid regions of thought, Sandel delivers a kind of drama, crafted in advance, sharpened by improvisation, and throwing into relief the way in which intellectual life is a shared enterprise, an effort to explore and contest questions of enduring interest to us all—a strong vision of the heart of humanist inquiry.

Summarizing Sandel’s Technique

To emulate Sandel’s success, I think we ought to follow a procedure more or less like this: first, list the conceptual positions and problems that comprise the lecture. Second, reflect on the human values, available to everyone, on which these conceptual positions will bear—if possible, by identifying cruxes, or points of disagreement where positions are distinguished. Third, frame questions that make the conceptual positions *legible* to the shared human values by stating the crux or human value plainly. Last, build a lecture plan which sets up the conceptual positions, pivoting frequently from them, to the questions that summon audience engagement. For humanists, this phrase “conceptual positions” is intended to include (1) moments of historical narrative, (2) theoretical ideas, (3) key passages in literary texts, (4) crucial interpretive alternatives with respect to any of these.

Example with Assignment

A modest version of Sandel’s pedagogy can be tried with Andre Dubus’ short story “Killings,” which, amid flashbacks and complex narration, stages the revenge killing a father enacts on his son’s killer. This revenge is a premediated murder in cold blood, but the skill of the story-telling is such that many readers of the story read in the anxious worry that the father *won’t* exact his

lawless revenge. In the class preceding the discussion of “Killings,” I ask the students broad Sandel-like questions: “Who here thinks that we should never take the law into our own hands?” etc. The votes, followed by the advocacy of exponents, helps establish a broad context—part exchange of ideas, part vote. The following day, I deliver a lecture in which the “conceptual positions” are defined by moments in the narrative that elaborate the father’s motives, pivoting often from these accumulating moments to Sandel questions: “Who, at this point, feels themselves beginning to hope the father will take revenge?” Hands are counted. Why? With literature, answers to the question “Why?” will take the form of textual citation, so that the dialogue reverts frequently to close reading. But what energizes that close reading is a question of larger import about our system of law, and the growing consciousness, in the room, that some peers agree, some disagree, and some are not sure. “Where,” the reflecting student is asking herself, “do I stand?”

Implications

Superficially, this procedure might sound like what we’re always doing, but it really isn’t. When we do this, some things start to change. Powerpoints, I find, vanish; reading lists shift, exams change, and discussion increases. Powerpoints clog the flow of discussion and violate the implicit rhetoric of the discussion space. The Sandel technique reshapes how we think about reading lists because it requires us to think fixedly not only about our picture of what the great problems are, but chiefly about how those can be made legible to students. Texts are selected accordingly, which can transform the look of a syllabus. The way we test and grade in large lectures is also changed. In the induced-coma-monologue version of the lecture, tests are places where we reward the raw stamina of those students who can keep their eyes open and regurgitate what we’ve told them. In the Sandel lecture, the knowledge transfer revolves around the crux questions, which become the hooks on which everything else hangs. This pedagogy wagers that students recall better when they give a damn. Our task is to discover inquiries they’ll care about, dramatize those inquiries with votes and animated discussion, which show that others give a damn too, then send tendrils outward from giving a damn to nuance, history, interpretation, and text. Sometimes it works.