

Sheedy Address

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First, let me say just how honored I am to receive this award, and express my sincere gratitude to the faculty, Mark and especially those students who endorsed me for this distinction. While professors wear many hats, as scholars and researchers and administrators, we know that our most important role at a university is our role as teachers. To be recognized for doing it well, and to be included among the distinguished group of past Sheedy winners, is about the highest honor I can imagine

Today I thought I'd speak in defense of what I think is an important component of higher education, but one that has lately suffered from a bit of a PR crisis. Since it is a big part of what I and so many others do when we teach, I thought I'd spend a little time seeing what can be done to shore up its image. In recent years, there has been considerable emphasis on the need for smaller classes, discussion-oriented seminars, and personal contact with professors. Generally, I think this emphasis is fully appropriate. Without question, a very important form of instruction involves mentoring and small group discussions. In fact, it is a tremendous honor to share this award with Gail, who I know is exceptionally gifted at teaching in the discussion-oriented setting. But sometimes people infer that because smaller seminars are good, then large, lecture-oriented classes must be bad. This afternoon, I want to suggest that this way of looking at things is misguided, and that there is still something to be said for good-old-fashioned lecturing; that is, for standing up in front of a group of people – even a large group – and delivering a clear presentation of the material. So today I'm going to lecture about the value of lecturing, which is a bit self-referential, but hopefully not self-defeating.

To begin, one of the reasons lecturing is viewed negatively is because people assume that it is mode of instruction in which students are completely passive, as dormant receptacles of information, slouched in the back of the classroom. Yet while lectures do require students to listen carefully, listening in this context is hardly a passive phenomenon. That's why popular metaphors that treat a student's mind as an empty, dormant vessel in which professors pour knowledge – these are completely flawed. The brain just doesn't work that way. Indeed, I've often said that a better metaphor for the learning process is physical exercise. We all know that you can't get fit by just sitting around and having things done to you. No matter how good a coach or trainer might be, he or she is not going to get you in shape unless *you* are doing most of the work. Well, it turns out that developing the brain is, in many respects, a lot like developing your lungs or various muscles. In a lecture format, teachers can provide the requisite instruction. But no real learning is going to take place unless students do the heavy lifting of engaging the material.

So lecturing doesn't prevent active involvement on the part of the students. But it does mean that students are perhaps a bit more responsible for their own education. They must take on the role of active and aggressive learners. For example, the notes they take shouldn't simply copy what is being said. They should also include insights, questions, criticisms and connections to other ideas and themes. And the notes need to be continually examined and reviewed. Students

must also take advantage of office hours -- not just when there is an exam looming, but every single time they hear or read something they want to know more about. Furthermore, we must get away from the false view that discussions about course content can only take place inside a formal classroom. In truth, some of the most important interaction with the material happens outside of the classroom – in a variety of settings with many different people. Students need to realize that the entire campus is an environment for further exploration of what they are studying.

Of course, just as students are responsible for actively engaging the material, so too, professors are responsible for presenting it in a way that invites engagement. In fact, another reason lecturing is sometimes frowned upon is because when it is done poorly, it is much more obvious that something has gone wrong. Even if a discussion is misguided, irrelevant or utterly uninformative, people still walk away thinking something valuable just happened. In any event, bad lecturing is, like anything done badly – something to be avoided at all costs. But the mere fact that lecturing can be done in a manner that is disorganized or boring is no reason to think it can't also be done well. It is still the case that one of the most effective and efficient modes of teaching is through a clear and structured presentation. When done right, professors become something like intellectual tour guides, leading students through a discovery process that explores new ideas. A good lecturer constructs something close to a narrative that actually hooks the students and makes them want to hear more.

In my discipline, because of the revolutionary and counter-intuitive nature of so many philosophical topics, hooking the students is fairly easy. In fact, a student once told me that my introductory class made him feel like Neo in the movie the Matrix (without the cool sunglasses) because of the way it challenged his fundamental assumptions about reality. I come to them and say, “Look at what I have to show you. It is one of the most powerful and wonderful devices ever invented. It is called an argument, and they have repeatedly been used to change the course of human history. This particular one was built in the 14th century. Look at the premises. Notice how reasonable they appear. They merely restate something we all believe. And now look at the argument's form. It appears to be valid and that means that if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true. But now look at that conclusion! Have you ever seen anything so outrageous, so utterly mind-blowing in your life?! If that conclusion is right, then we are really in serious trouble. Now what are we going to do about this? You can't just ignore it – not now that I've brought it to your attention. Well, let's get to work and see what can be done.”

If all goes right, then even I'm doing most of the talking, the students are nevertheless paying close attention. I've just told them a dark secret, one that, say, challenges their fundamental convictions about free will, or the morality of the way they live their lives, and they can't help but tune in. As a philosophy lecturer, I feel it is my job to provoke students. I want the students leaving the lecture stirred up, and maybe even a little angry so that they can't help but continue talking about what I've said. I want them debating my course material in the dorm rooms and the dining halls and, yes, even occasionally at a football game.

Now I don't mean to imply that there can't also be important exchanges that take place inside the classroom. Despite the size of my introductory class – with 250 students – I often welcome questions and entertain various objections. In fact, in course evaluations, the two most common

criticisms are that I take too many questions, and that I don't take enough questions. Either way, I find the questions not only help the students, but they also provide me with valuable feedback and reveal areas that need clarification and elaboration.

Fortunately, there are now various innovations and multi-media resources available that can enhance teaching a large class. Things like Powerpoint and WEB CT help to make the material more accessible both in and out of the classroom. But in the final analysis, I've found that what students really want and appreciate are the sorts of things that serve as the foundation of learning. They want interesting material presented in a way that is understandable, well-organized, pertinent to their lives and explained through examples and illustrations. Multi-media bells and the whistles can assist in making the material easier to digest. But they are still bells and whistles. They can't take the place of a clear and enthusiastic presentation of the material.

Another misguided reason lecturing is sometimes viewed negatively is because of the significant role teaching assistants often play in big courses. In most large lecture-oriented classes, students meet in much smaller discussion sections led by a TA who is a graduate student. Now I think this arrangement provides the best of both worlds. On the one hand, students get a formal and organized presentation of the material, *and*, on the other hand, they get the chance to discuss the material in much smaller setting. But this set-up is sometimes attacked because its a "mere" graduate student who serves as the leader of the discussion group. Why, critics sometimes ask, are parents spending so much to send their kids to be taught by amateurs? Well, the simple answer is that many of these so-called amateurs are among the best teachers at Notre Dame, and many undergraduates receive their most rewarding learning experiences through graduate student TAs. Despite being over-worked and under-paid, graduate TAs play an essential role in helping students to understand the course content. They also do most of the hard work in teaching students how to write and think. Indeed, because graduate students are closer in age to undergraduates, they are uniquely positioned to serve as intellectual role models with whom undergraduates can identify. And through workshops, like those provided by the Kaneb center, TA's at Notre Dame are continually receiving instruction on effective teaching – something that many professors have never had. So instead of disparaging comments about their role in higher education, graduate teaching assistants deserve our thanks for providing a critical component of higher education. There is no way I would be receiving this award today were it not for the hard work and commitment to teaching that my TA's have displayed. In fact, this award belongs to them every bit as it does to myself.

Perhaps one final reason people take a dim view of lecturing is because it involves the least egalitarian form of instruction, where the difference between teacher and student is the most pronounced. The lecture format presents a setting in which professors are the masters and the students are, well, students. For some, this arrangement comes with a taint of intellectual elitism. So am I saying that I think the students are intellectually inferior to professors, at least with regard to their knowledge, and that what they have to say on a subject is not as informed, and therefore not as important, as what we have to say?

Yes, that is pretty much exactly what I'm saying. I am an unabashed intellectual elitist. I think everyone teaching at this university should be. We should recognize that there is a significant asymmetry between the students and ourselves. Our primary role as teachers is imparting

knowledge to those who lack it. Consequently, the transmission of information is, for the most part, a one-way affair. After all, that is what distinguishes a classroom from a coffee shop or an internet chat room. In this context, being elitist means that you are committed to very high standards. It means that you strive for excellence in yourself and others. It means that you work to transform your students – to convert them into people who are exceptionally knowledgeable and who think very carefully and critically while embracing a strong commitment to the truth. In other words, to convert them into elite minds as well.

To follow up on this point, let me suggest one further value associated with lecturing. For many of our younger students, their understanding of what counts as intellectual analysis stems from what they see on TV. And as we all know, much of what is on TV involves disingenuous spin, deliberate distortions and comically fallacious arguments. The typical goal here is not getting at the truth, but winning the debate and persuading viewers. Now I think most students are sufficiently savvy to see through much of this. But they crave something different – something better. A lecturer can and should present a different and more responsible model of intellectual engagement. We can demonstrate to students what it means to explore a topic with objectivity, fairness, and intellectual integrity. For example, my students sometimes seem surprised when I offer vigorous defenses of opposing viewpoints. They are accustomed to seeing people endorse a position, and then aggressively ridicule other viewpoints. We need to show them an alternative model. We need to show them that when the goal is to ascertain the truth, and not simply win the debate, we must be prepared to revise our own views if a more plausible position is out there. Yet we can't know if a more plausible position is out there unless we give alternative views a fair shake. This doesn't mean professors can't endorse certain viewpoints. After all, some theories are clearly superior in terms of evidential support and coherence. But it does mean that when alternative perspectives are presented, they should be presented with fairness and objectivity. Showing students how this is done is just one of the ways in which a lecturer can function not just as a conduit of information, but also as an exemplar of intellectually responsible behavior. We need to teach them that just as there are moral virtues and vices, so too, there are intellectual virtues and vices. What I've tried to suggest today is that the lecture format is still a place where many of these intellectual virtues can be put on display.

Thank-you again for this honor.