ALTERNATIVES TO LECTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Spoken and recorded lectures have been and will continue to be a vital part of higher education, both because of their ability to explain complex ideas and because learners expect them to make up at least part of an online curriculum. Educational research, however, consistently shows two limitations of using recorded lectures in online courses. First, learners tend to overestimate how much information they retain from listening to a lecture. Without meaningful reflection and interaction, learners tend to believe they retain more from lectures than their performance suggests. Second, over-reliance on lecture does not naturally encourage meta-cognition and critical thinking, both of which have been shown to have a positive effect on academic achievement because learners must self-regulate their efforts.

As an instructor, should you get rid of lectures altogether? No, but you can often shorten them and use them more effectively when combined with other teaching strategies, such as the following:

- Using written reflection questions and annotations to guide learners through assigned readings
- Asking learners to analyze and identify concepts learned from online discussions
- Asking learners to generate course content by researching, presenting on, and/or discussing topics relevant to the course's subject matter

A CLOSER LOOK

You can reduce unnecessary lecture content and promote critical thinking in at least three ways:

1. **Supplement lectures with written material**, which is faster for learners to read, easier to annotate with notes, and easier for you to update. Many effective online instructors will break a long lecture into multiple parts and put activities or tasks in between them. For example, you could introduce a topic with a brief lecture, create a question sheet with key topics to investigate as learners work through the readings, and then provide a written or recorded summary for learners to watch afterward.

2. **Create intentional opportunities for learners to listen to and reflect on peer analysis** through activities such as fishbowl discussions. In a typical fishbowl discussion, half of the learners in a course work through a real-life scenario analysis while the others read their peers' analysis and reflect on what they've learned through an individually written assignment (see the example below).

3. **Consider opportunities for learners to find and create their own content.** Instructors who teach content that changes rapidly (technology, business practices, communication strategies, etc.) sometimes ask learners to investigate and present on issues from current media or research. The instructor then uses these topics as a focal point for discussion and even written assignments. The instructor might lecture on fundamental concepts, such as how to analyze an issue or writing best practices, but then ask learners to apply these concepts to topics they research. In some cases, integrating a video-recording tool like Bongo can provide an effective means for learners to record and share their presentations.

> **Good Reasons to Use Lecture:**
>
> - Expand on difficult content covered in readings
> - Share stories/experiences related to course content
> - Demonstrate something you expect learners to do

EXAMPLE

In an online undergraduate class in human resources management, the instructors used fishbowl discussions to help learners apply concepts from the readings and videos to a realistic scenario. The instructors began each weekly lesson with a short lecture (5 to 10 minutes) that introduced key concepts. Learners then worked through the assigned readings, online articles, and videos taken from other sites. Learners were then split into two groups:

Learners Inside the Fishbowl

Learners assigned to be inside the fishbowl were asked to:

- Analyze a scenario related to the readings, such as a company struggling to develop a retention strategy or an HR manager developing employee profiles to identify needs.
- Respond to a series of questions about the scenario (e.g., What are the short-range, intermediate-range, and long-term staff needs of the department likely to be?) through an online discussion.

Learners Outside the Fishbowl

Learners assigned to be outside the fishbowl were asked to:

- Read the discussion posts of those inside the fishbowl.
- Compose a written reflection that completed statements such as, "One fact that I learned from reading this discussion was _____" and "The best takeaway from this lesson was _____."
- Submit the written reflection to the class.

Every week, learners switched roles to spend time both inside and outside the fishbowl. The instructors commented that the issues learners uncovered often surprised them and gave them ideas for concepts to cover in future iterations of the course. In addition, learners experience two ways of interacting with their instructors and each other.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Self-regulated learning strategies & academic achievement in online higher education learning environments: A systematic review by *The Internet and Higher Education Journal*
- Rethinking the fishbowl discussion strategy: A mechanism to construct meaning and foster critical thinking and communication skills through student dialogue by the *Journal of Health Education Teaching Techniques*
- Overcoming overconfidence in learning from video-recorded lectures: Implications of interpolated testing for online education by the *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*