

What's the Use of Lectures?

Donald Bligh. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

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First, some disappointing news for those of us who lecture: lectures are ineffective, as compared to other teaching methods, for teaching values, inspiring interest, developing personalities, or instilling behavioral skills. So why lecture? That's the central question in Donald Bligh's *What's the Use of Lectures?* The answer seems simple enough: "Use lectures to teach information. Do not rely on them to promote thought, change attitudes, or develop behavioral skills if you can help it" (20). The logical question to ask next is "How can a lecture best teach information?"

Bligh offers eight principles to follow for using lectures to teach information.

- Make the lecture meaningful to the students. Lectures are easier to comprehend when they connect with students' everyday realities.
- Use "whole learning" to teach understanding and "part learning" to teach specific information. In my course on American society and popular culture, I open each lecture by asking students to think sociologically about the topic at hand and to identify important sociological research questions ("whole learning"). I then move to "part learning" as I teach the specific findings of research that has been conducted in particular areas.
- Organize the subject. Summaries, overviews, and concept can provide an overarching narrative for each lecture. The syllabus and the construction of exams, papers, and assignments provide a similar narrative for the entire semester. This level of organization aids student learning by connecting the specific components of the course together into a comprehensible whole.
- Put new information to use swiftly. Quizzes, short papers, discussions, and assignments provide an opportunity for students to put new knowledge to work, thus improving their retention.
- Use repetition within lectures. State the key points at the beginning and at the end. Repeat the definitions of concepts and important conclusions often.
- Frequently provide feedback on learning. Students learn better when they know how to evaluate their own progress. Testing knowledge early and often improves student learning.
- Keep students alert. (Poor posture indicates low student attention.) Mix up visual and auditory stimulation. Provide an element of novelty in each lecture. Interject your lecture with "change-ups" that will energize your students' attention spans
- Connect new concepts to previous lectures. By drawing on previous knowledge to teach new information, you reinforce the earlier concept while making the new information easier to learn.

Additional reading from the library of the CTL:

Brookfield, S. (2006). *The skillful teacher : on technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass: 97-113.

Heppner, F. H. (2007). *Teaching the large college class : a guidebook for instructors with multitudes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass: 35-36.

McKeachie, W. J., Svinicki, M. D., & Hofer, B. K. (2006). *McKeachie's teaching tips : strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 57-73.

