

## Little Lectures?

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In each issue of *Innovative Higher Education* we attempt to push the boundaries of teaching and learning by featuring the latest research on innovations in higher education. Accordingly, an article in the March 6, 2009, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* with the intriguing title “These Lectures are Gone in 60 Seconds” caught my attention. The title of the story enticed me to further reading, in particular, the words that followed “lecture”, i.e., “gone” and “seconds”. The combination of these words challenged my conception of this traditional pedagogical approach. In my frame of reference, lectures are “long” and “meaty” and are meant to sustain the attention of an audience while ideas and issues are dealt with in-depth by someone knowledgeable on the topic. Most lectures may be transient in that they are delivered at a set time and place, but they become permanent when they are printed or recorded.

My thinking took me further to the nature of historic and contemporary lectures; and I stumbled across the “Syllabus of Lectures on the History of Education” (Macmillan Company, 1904), an impressive 600+ page book no longer in print but digitized by Google. Actually I did not stumble as I was sitting at my computer surfing the web. Historically, important speeches and lectures were recorded for future generations; and, while contemporary lectures are still sometimes published in print, they are now more frequently recorded for posterity and accessibility as audio or video podcasts. For example, my academic home, The University of Georgia’s Institute of Higher Education, sponsors the Louise McBee lecture each fall. For this event a distinguished guest speaks for 60 minutes about issues important to higher education, and the speech is both videoed and printed for distribution. Interestingly, in recent years fewer speakers have been willing to convert their presentations to printed format since the “lectures” are often delivered as PowerPoint presentations or in a more conversational format.

Lectures have a long history in higher education, which dates from the medieval university when professors would read from texts to students who took notes. Today’s lecture proponents point to efficacy with large classes of several hundred students. The close alignment of lecture and large numbers is captured in the term “lecture hall.”

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Numerous books give advice for structuring and delivering lectures, and I assume future publications will include the “1-minute lecture.” Lecture opponents focus on its one-way communication and advocate findings from research and reports by professional associations which stress the use of active pedagogies, such as discussion, writing, field and group work, to make learning more meaningful. Supporters of the lecture understand its inherent value and the fiscal, structural, and physical conditions that necessitate its ongoing use, especially for core courses in undergraduate education. Consequently, faculty members and administrators struggle with incorporating more active pedagogies into the long-standing educational tradition of lecturing.

The *Chronicle* article featuring the use of the 60-second or “microlecture” at San Juan College in New Mexico for its online courses (<http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i26/26a00102.htm>) begins as follows: “Take a 60-minute lecture. Cut the excess verbiage, do away with most of the details, and pare it down to key concepts and themes.” A course designer at the community college said the microlecture was first introduced in an online degree program in occupational safety where enrollments soon skyrocketed, and the technique is now being included in other courses of study. Evidently, courses can be produced quickly using the format of microlecture, assignment, and then discussion although the article acknowledges that the microlecture may not be useful where sustained argument is necessary (e.g., English literature); but its use is clearly gaining momentum in distance education. The article ends with the five steps required to create the 1-minute lecture: 1) decide on the key concept(s) you are trying to teach, 2) develop a 15 to 30 second introduction and conclusion around your key concepts, 3) record in the medium of choice, 4) design an assignment to extend the lecture, and 5) upload the course.

Traditional advice on developing lectures often suggests keeping the lecture in the 10 to 20 minute range as listeners lose concentration after that time period. I began to think maybe I had no idea what a lecture is anyway, so I decided to turn to Merriam Webster (online) to get a formal definition (15th century): “a discourse given before an audience or class especially for instruction”. Okay, time is not mentioned, but how short can “a discourse” be?

Admittedly, the use of the microlecture is presently only being used in online courses according to the information in this report; but, after thinking about this, I have a series of questions about this 1-minute phenomenon. Does the 60-second lecture refine the message, create clarity, and focus the student? Because of their involvement with video games and text-messaging, are students so short in attention span that 60 seconds are the new 20 minutes? Does the delivery mechanism affect the fundamentals of teaching? Is a 20-minute lecture online different from a 20-minute lecture face-to-face? Will microlectures become the new standard in the traditional lecture hall? If so, could a large 50-minute class effectively become a series of four 2-minute lectures? Is it essentially what David Ausubel suggested in 1960 about advanced organizers? It is information and concepts presented prior to learning used to organize new information. Are lectures frequently ineffective because we bury the main points in too many words for the novice? And, finally, where is the research to examine this new phenomenon?

Well, I have enjoyed thinking about the 1-minute lecture, and I am considering incorporating this technique into my summer graduate course. Perhaps the discipline of putting the key concepts into 1 minute presentations will focus the students and the assignments. Still, I am not convinced that these are lectures; and I think that, overall, we are playing with words. Active learning, now that’s an *idea*, no matter what we call it.