



Drawings by Jim Hull

# The Lively Lecture— 8 Variations

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The lecture system to classes of hundreds, which was very much that of the twelfth century, suited Adams not at all. Barred from philosophy and bored by facts, he wanted to teach his students something not wholly useless.

—*The Education of Henry Adams*

**T**he recent flurry of criticisms of higher education, although focusing on an integrated core curriculum and the development of fundamental competencies, all exhort professors and those who administer the faculty reward system to pay more attention to teaching and

higher order cognitive and affective capabilities in students, and promoting more active student “involvement” in their own learning.<sup>1</sup> Since both common sense and educational research indicate that these goals are more readily achieved in smaller rather than larger classes, a likely target of these calls for reform is the lecture.

## Criticism of the Lecture

Although the *lektor* has been the primary medium of college and university instruction since the middle ages,

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learning. This means, among other things, increasing faculty “engagement” and interaction with students (especially in the first years of college), developing

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in recent years it has been under assault not only by distinguished educational panels but also by student protestors, learning theorists, faculty development consultants, and even by (some) tenure and promotion committees. Faculty members have been bombarded with messages to lecture less and to use discussion and other innovative participatory methods of teaching more.

In the sixth edition of his influential book, *Teaching Tips*, Wilbert J. McKeachie concluded that although lectures are “sometimes an effective way of communicating information,” he had “a suspicion, . . . supported by bits of evidence, that other methods of teach-

ing may be more effective than lecturing in achieving some of the higher level cognitive and attitudinal objectives."<sup>2</sup> Reflecting a decade of further studies, Bette LaSere Erickson and Glenn R. Erickson emphatically state that "the lecture is less effective than other methods when instructional goals involve the application of information, the development of thinking skills, or the modification of attitudes."<sup>3</sup>

Attention span studies, for example, suggest that after 15 or 20 minutes the lecture loses its effectiveness even in transmitting information. Students, of course, routinely respond that lectures are "boring" and "worthless." Thus, as Henry Adams suspected 80 years ago, if a teacher wants to avoid being "wholly useless," it is best not to lecture.

### Justification of the Lecture

Despite all the criticism, however, the lecture has withstood all assaults on its old, yellowed walls, standing up under the siege with battered but enduring strength. The onslaught has done more to cause faculty discomfort and guilt than actually to change practices. From within the safety of the old walls of tenure, tradi-

- analyze and show relationships among seemingly dissimilar ideas
- inspire a reverence for learning
- challenge beliefs and habits of thinking, and
- breed enthusiasm and motivation for further study.

To hear a good lecture is an inspiring experience. We leave with our imagination broadened and our interest piqued; we find ourselves entertained, prodded, and illuminated in turn. What evokes our response is an intricate blend of qualities. The lecture must have sufficient intellectual content to challenge us. . . . Like a dramatic monologue, it engages our emotions and keeps them in play, thanks to frequent shifts in mood and intensity. It mixes humor and erudition, and gives us a sense of the personal involvement of the lecturer . . .<sup>4</sup>

In hearing a lecture like this, Henry Adams notwithstanding, students receive much more than useless facts. Such a lecture, as Emerson said in the "American Scholar" address in 1837, aims "not to drill, but to . . . set the hearts of youth on flame." Ideally, there is engagement, excitement, and intense interaction, albeit passively experienced by students, in the act of listening and recording notes during an inspiring lecture.

In battles over the lecture method, both sides err in holding up a single stereotyped image. Defenders of the lecture usually cite the fiery and inspiring version described above, acknowledging, however, that "in practice . . . too few lectures attain this ideal."<sup>5</sup> Critics paint a dreary picture of the stodgy old pedant (or an uninspiring nervous young one) listlessly mumbling overly long and obtuse sentences read from crumbling, yellowed (or freshly word-processed) notes. Doubtless there are both important facts and gems of wisdom in Professor Mumble's tired words, but they are lost on most students who tune out early to fantasize last night's winning jump shot or the coming weekend's party. At its best, the lecture ends five minutes early as the professor asks, "Are there any questions?" There usually are not.

Neither image of the lecture serves us well. We need, I believe, to redefine the "lecture" in order to achieve the kind of involvement educators have agreed enhances student learning. The purpose of this essay is to suggest several such variations. Although disparate in approach, each variation is motivational; each imparts information; each engages students actively. It is my intention to show that interactive student participation is possible even in the traditional setting of large mass lecture classes in dimly lit halls with tiered rows of immovable seats bolted to the floor.

Other than the obvious importance of content mastery, traditional advice about giving lectures applies to each of the different forms described here. Objectives should be clearly stated and written down on the board with an outline of major topics to be "covered." One

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tion, and expediency, faculty members continue to lecture. Only a tone of defensiveness hints at the battle outside. "I'd like to do less lecturing, but I've got too much to cover." Or, "that's all right for you but I have to lecture in my field." Or, "I'd like to try some new ideas, but I can't—I have 300 students in the class, you know." As salvos of rhetoric and reports fly back and forth across the parapets, life in the classroom goes on much as before. Most college professors, even those like myself who advocate a decentralized classroom, still spend more class hours "lecturing" than anything else.

For some good reasons. Other than the expediency of economy of scale, there are many reasonable justifications of the well-prepared, clearly organized, and dynamically delivered lecture. When done well, the best lectures:

- impart new information
- explain, clarify and organize difficult concepts
- model a creative mind at work or the problem-solving process

should only make two or three major points in any given class, using several focused examples or experiences to illustrate each main idea. Students should be given specific assignments to practice their mastery of these ideas. Teachers should be sensitive to their audience, aware of its energy level, and prepared to adapt the level and form of presentation accordingly, varying the format for different class periods and often even within one period.<sup>6</sup>

### Importance of Variety

There is no moment more important than when a professor decides—given a wide array of pedagogical variations from which to choose—that for *these* particular primary and secondary goals for *this* particular class period, *these* particular teaching and learning methods make the most sense. For example, if a new topic is to be introduced, the teacher might either deliver a traditional lecture filled with overarching themes and necessary groundwork information or present an emotionally charged film or multi-media show to arouse interest in the new topic. Or, if students' energy and enthusiasm have been noticeably declining, a teacher will want to structure a way of getting student participation and feedback in order to understand what they are thinking and feeling. Or, if a recent examination has revealed a widespread deficiency in some competency, a class period should be devoted to giving students either a model of or practice in that skill.

Deciding which goal and method is most appropriate for any given class—especially when recognizing that students have different learning styles and are at different stages of cognitive and moral development—is a vitally crucial moment for a teacher's effectiveness in enhancing student learning.

As different students learn from diverse approaches, so also are there diverse ways to be a "good" teacher. The point is to select that style most consistent with one's personality. Students are not fooled when we try to be something other than what we are. But at the same time, since we seek to stretch the ways students learn, they appreciate our openly avowed efforts to expand the ways we teach, even in ways we might initially find uncomfortable. It is in this spirit of guarded but willing experimentation that I hope we will approach these eight variations of a lecture.

### 1. The Exquisite Oral Essay

This is the traditional lecture, executed with the kind of excellence to which we all aspire—and once in a while achieve. The oral essay is a final polished work which skillfully treats a single intellectual question or problem. It has unity: the topic is introduced, illustrated, and concluded within fifty minutes; it does not spill over to the following Wednesday. Thus, the single class period

is an "intellectual experience" for the students as they listen in awe to the professor's "perfect" presentation. The purpose of this kind of lecture is not only to convey substantive information but also to demonstrate the professor doing well the job of professing. Students are treated to "a window on the teacher's mind," watching with much the same intensity that one has when observing an unusually skillful pianist or salesman. Our courses, no doubt, should include some of these performances, but not to the exclusion of other approaches. Oral essays reduce students to the role of passive auditors, at best engaged in an "internal dialogue," as David Bergman puts it, with the professor.<sup>7</sup> Although the oral essay is inspirationally masterful, the students witness a finished product, not the process.

### 2. The Participatory Lecture

Would it not be more instructive if students could observe, or better yet participate in, the creation of a lecture? Imagine a group of students clustered around the professor's cluttered desk as he or she prepares a lecture. On the desk are several sources and a crude outline. The students observe their professor deciding what purposes the lectures should fulfill and why certain substantive points and examples are chosen to emphasize and why others are discarded. To be a part of this exhilarating (and sometimes painful) process of creation is a genuine window on the mind at work. The lecture itself the next morning, by comparison, is but a show. Obviously, it is impossible to invite four hundred—or even

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forty—students into one's office or home for the time it takes to construct a good lecture. But can the process of creation be duplicated, or at least approximated, with student participation, in the classroom itself?

The participatory lecture is best described as orderly brainstorming in which students generate ideas which are then organized in some rational, coherent pattern on the chalkboard. When beginning a new topic, start with a participatory lecture by inviting students to brainstorm together by calling out "everything you know about World War I" (or Freud, Darwinism, China, waves and particles). As recorded on the blackboard (or

on an overhead projection), a list will unfold of a mixture of specific facts, impressionistic feelings and prejudices, and possibly even interpretive judgments. Students bring to most courses both some familiarity and considerable misinformation, both of which can be ascertained in a participatory lecture.

The only rule of brainstorming is to acknowledge every offering by writing it down. As ideas are pro-

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posed, you might even arrange what you hear in rough categories, but tell the students what you're doing lest you be suspected of manipulating their contributions. Better yet, once the board is filled, ask students to suggest categories and to comment on the accuracy and relative importance of the array of facts, impressions, and interpretations. Refinements can be dealt with by use of the eraser, a luxury not allowed in the formal lecture. The action of an evolving creation on the chalkboard, especially for the visually oriented learners of the television generation, reinforces learning far better than the lost words of an entirely auditory presentation.

When the class is over, an organized configuration of the ideas contributed by both students and instructor will appear on the chalkboard. Ask one student to take notes so you can run off copies for the class. The important point, however, is not the final chalkboard creation but the process. The participatory lecture differs from the oral essay by requiring more thinking and less recording. Ideally, students spend their time not transcribing or doodling but concentrating on contributing

to the evolving creation in front of them. Obviously, the participatory lecture can be done badly. When students have not brought to the class the limited knowledge provided by their prior experience or reading, or when the professor manipulates student statements to a rigidly preconceived schema, the experience can be dreary.

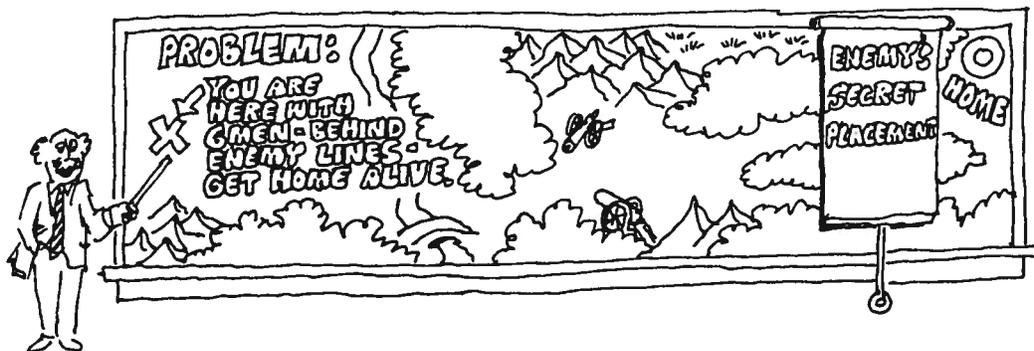
But when the mutual participation is free and open, students are actively engaged and teachers might even learn new insights about familiar material. Roles are blurred and all become learners and teachers. Although obviously less efficient than an oral essay, what is important is that the participatory lecture involves many students actively and *can be done with large classes*.

In a sense, all the remaining variations are versions of the participatory lecture and involve varying degrees of faculty-student interaction. It is the presence of *some* interaction, especially in large lecture courses, that students and recent critics of undergraduate education have been calling for. Martin J. Finklestein's synthesis of recent research on student evaluations concludes that "the teaching practices that a faculty member adopts in the classroom are clearly and strongly related to perceived teaching effectiveness." In defining teaching effectiveness, students consistently rate highest those faculty who show respect for students and their progress, who pay attention to classroom processes, and who use presentational styles that encourage participation.<sup>8</sup>

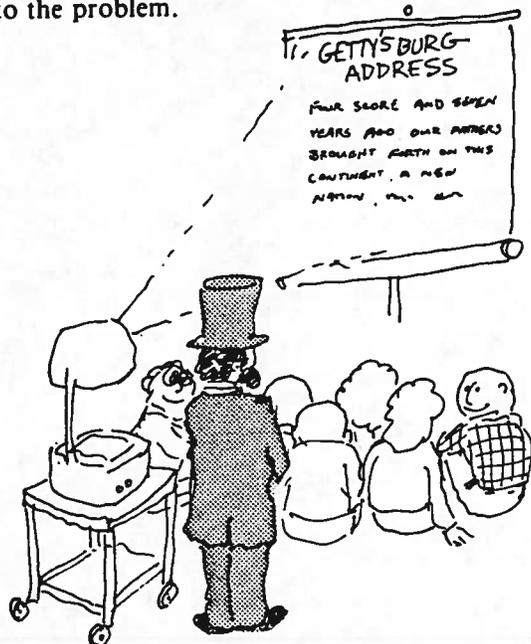
### 3. Problem Solving: Demonstrations, Proofs, and Stories

What brought the two former friends, one in blue and one in grey, to oppose each other on Cemetery Ridge in Gettysburg that hot July afternoon?

This lecture begins with a question, or a paradox, or an enigma, or a compellingly unfinished human story—some tantalizing problem that hooks student interest. The answer unfolds during the class hour; if skillful the unfolding will be completed with only about ten or fewer minutes left in the period. Solving the problem, depending on what it is or in what field, may require a scientific demonstration, a mathematical proof, an economic model, the outcome of the novel's plot, or an his-



torical narrative. The question is woven throughout the lecture, inviting students to fill in imaginative spaces in the story (or model) with their own unfolding solutions to the problem.



The unfolding can consist primarily of a lecture, in which students fill in their successive answers passively, or of an interactive process in which students' tentative solutions to a problem, or completions of a story, are elicited, listed on the board, and discussed. "What do you think will happen?" "Which solution, outcome, or explanation makes the most sense to you?" If no consensus, the teacher lectures a little more, invites a new set of student responses, and asks the question again. Ideally, when the problem is finally resolved, most students will have figured it out themselves just before the teacher's solution is announced.

#### 4. Energy Shifts: Alternating Mini-Lectures and Discussions

I firmly believe that the flow of energy around a classroom has a great deal to do with how well students learn. The following variation, which is similar to the participatory and problem-solving lectures, recognizes the conclusions of attention span studies by making clearly delineated 15–20 minute shifts in energy from the teacher to students and back again. The instructor begins with a 20-minute lecture setting the stage for some issue, which involves a 10–15 minute discussion of implications and effects, followed by another mini-lecture on what happened next. The last 5 minutes might be spent by presenting students with an assignment: a problem or application of the issues raised in the second mini-lecture. Thus, the next class would begin with the mini-discussion, followed by a mini-lecture, etc. This alternating approach can describe any natural or social

science class where instruction calls for a mixture of theory and data, model and findings, or hypothesis and experimental demonstration, with intervening considerations of how best to proceed next. The point is to shorten segments of one method of learning, change the voices(s) heard, and shift the energy.

In a lecture hall filled with 200–400 students, the mini-discussions need not involve "breaking up into groups of five or six" (as they well might in smaller classes of 100 or less). Rather, huge classes can be handled by asking two or three students sitting next to each other to discuss the problem together for a few minutes, and then inviting volunteers to stand and report conclusions and concerns. This process provides public affirmation of the appropriate issues (or not), thus giving feedback both to other students and to the teacher on how well the students were prepared for a particular problem. Even "wrong" feedback is instructive and sharpens the focus of the next appropriate mini-lecture and reading assignment. Without the mini-discussion segment, the teacher might not have known the gaps in student knowledge and gone ahead with the next lesson, which is most serious in sequential science courses. Moreover, with energy shifts students experience a variety of voices and a sense of shared responsibility for their learning.

#### 5. Textual Exegesis: Modeling Analytical Skills

Jennifer, would you read the top paragraph on page 40 please?

One deficiency of undergraduate education we have been hearing about (and often experiencing) is that our students are illiterate. They do not know how to read, we are told, which is a rather necessary prerequisite for developing analytical skills. The lecture setting of any size provides an opportunity to practice an old-fashioned but underused technique: *explication du texte*. We do not often enough go to a text and read and analyze passages together out loud. Students can develop these skills by seeing them modeled, followed by an opportunity to practice analyzing a text themselves.

A class of 50 or 500 students, following along in their books, or on handouts, or on an overhead projection, can watch a professor working through selected passages of a document, speech, sermon, essay, poem, proof, or fictional passage. Upon reaching a particularly ambiguous passage, the mini-discussion in groups of 3–5 students could be employed, thus shifting the energy and providing practice and feedback for students. The professor's response to how different groups of students resolve the ambiguity ("What is Locke saying here?") furthers the learning.

This process of modeling how to read analytically can be done for other than just verbal texts. Art historians,

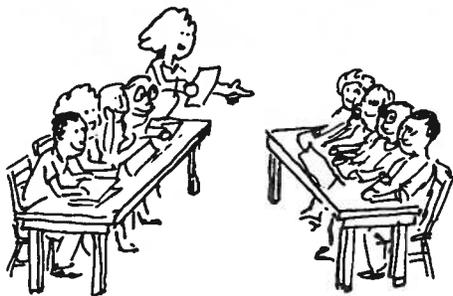
musicologists, economists, and anthropologists have traditionally used lectures to show students how to “read” an abstract painting, sonata, supply and demand curve, or artifact. Natural scientists explain their “texts” with elaborate demonstrations (and labs for practice). What I am suggesting is that in those many courses where the mastery of traditional verbal texts is fundamental to the learning goals of the course, we use the lecture period as an opportunity to teach critical interpretation and analysis to our students—that is, how to read.

A further variation on this approach, especially for social science courses, is to use the lecture period to train students in other analytical skills—quantitative analysis of graphs, charts and tables, and how to read maps, interview schedules, or census and polling data. In sum, make sure students have a copy of the document in question in front of them (or visual access through slides and overhead transparencies), and then follow three steps: modeling by the professor, practice by the students, and feedback.

## 6. Cutting Large Classes in Half without Losing Control: Debates

“But my class is too large for these gimmicks!” “I couldn’t possibly let them go into those little groups in the middle of class. I wouldn’t trust what they’re talking about and am afraid I’d lose control.”

Although assigning specific tasks to small groups of two or three students can disperse energy and achieve interaction in large classes, not all instructors would be comfortable with the uncertainty of “what they’re talking about.” The concern for control is a genuine and important one. Although once we open up the lecture



hall to voices other than our own we risk some diminished control over content and tone, none of these variations is intended to relinquish the teacher’s control of the class. Therefore, let me suggest a few ways of achieving more student participation and engagement in large classes without changing the professor’s central and vital controlling role in the classroom.

One obvious strategy is to take advantage of the central aisle dividing large lecture halls in order to structure debates. Students can either support the side of an issue assigned to the half of the hall where they happen to be

sitting, or as prearranged, come to class prepared to take a seat on one particular side of a debate. Whichever approach you use, you can maintain rigorous control from the podium in guiding the process: “From the right side of the hall we will hear five statements on behalf of the Confederacy, after which we will hear five statements from the left on behalf of the Union.” The process can be repeated once or twice, including the inevitable rebuttals, before concluding by asking for two or three volunteers to make summary arguments for each side.

Although neither one of two polar sides of an issue contains the whole truth, it is pedagogically energizing and valuable (if only to point out the complexity of truth) for students to be compelled to choose and then to defend one side of a dichotomous question. Other obvious debate topics include such questions as: “Burke or Paine?” “Should Nora have left or stayed?” “Pro-life or pro-choice?” “Marx or Adam Smith?” “Waves or particles?” “Declare war or not?”

“But most important questions do not divide into halves. . . . My students would never settle for forced choices.”

When some students (quite rightly) refuse to choose one side or the other, create a middle ground and space and invite their reasons for choosing it. Students might learn how difficult it is to try to remain neutral on heated issues, especially during revolutionary times. Besides, some large lecture halls have two central aisles, which makes legitimizing a third position both intellectually defensible and physically possible. Whichever approach is used in dividing classes, the professor has maintained control and a central focus and students have added a participatory dimension to their learning in a traditional lecture setting.

## 7. Smaller Groups in Large Classes: Simulations and Role Playing

For those teachers willing occasionally to risk a little classroom chaos, the following variation is guaranteed to add energy, participation, and interaction to large lecture hall courses. I have written previously in this journal in more detail about using small groups and role-playing in history classes,<sup>9</sup> so here I will just sketch the outlines of this “lecture” variation. It is adaptable (often as simulations) to political science, economics, sociology, and other disciplines.

First, a crucial mini-lecture clearly establishes the context and setting for the role playing (defined as a loose simulation of actual actors and problems). Second, the class is divided into a number of small groups (of varying sizes and including duplicate roles depending on the overall class size), each group assigned a clearly delineated role—usually of some historical or contemporary group. Third, each group is given a

specific, concrete task—usually to propose a position and course of action. And fourth, the proposals emanating from different groups will inevitably conflict with each other in some way—ideologically, tactically, racially, regionally, or over scarce funds, land, jobs, power, or resources.

The format of such sessions can take whatever direction a professor wishes, given clear planning and instructions, assertive leadership, and a lot of luck. One

The first is based on Martin Duberman's 1960s drama, *In White America*, in which the historian-playwright skillfully pieced together actual quotations from the black historical experience in white America into a compellingly gripping drama. None of us is a Duberman or Arthur Miller, but we all have an eye (or a heart) for particularly moving quotations, poems, or song lyrics. Focusing on a single topic (e.g., male-female stereotypes, the Depression, work, the nature of

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might hear the proposals of different groups and immediately incorporate them into a lecture on what really happened or should happen as a result of these same conflicts and collisions. Or, one might carry out the role-playing process longer by structuring the stages of a meeting or convention that followed the initial proposals. The student groups might, for example, be instructed to prepare speeches and see the deliberations through to some conclusion, or to caucus in order to develop strategies, coalitions, and tactics for achieving their goals. Neat, simple, clear closures are not easy (short of the class-ending buzzer), but this variation for large lecture classes has tremendous potential for experiential learning and of course involves enormous energy and interaction.

When the professor wishes to bring closure, however, debriefing the exercise—which is essential—is an opportunity to restore order. The debriefing also helps to identify what was learned, and to make the transition to the next topic and pedagogical approach, probably a lecture to tie up loose ends.

#### **8. "Bells and Whistles": The Affective, Emotional Media Lecture**

Every time a colleague sees me heading off to class with my cassette recorder, and slide carousel, he says, "here come the bells and whistles." It is not intended as a compliment. No list of variations for large lecture classes is complete without acknowledging the use of media. Since much has been written on the use of films and other audio-visual techniques in teaching, I want to focus on two approaches designed to evoke an emotional involvement by affective, emotional learning, an area woefully neglected in college teaching.

warfare, or Chinese culture), put together a collage of quotations, not necessarily in any particular order. Invite some theater majors or an oral interpretation class (or some of your own students) to read the quotations in class one day, either as an extended presentation followed by a short discussion, or as a brief introduction to your lecture on the topic.

The second affective media suggestion is the synchronized slide-tape presentation, consciously matching a series of visual images with the words of a song or speech. One need not prepare a spectacular show with multiple slide images emanating from several automatically timed projectors. Rather, select two or three songs or a speech that you think captures the mood or tone of an event, era, or issue, and select some slides to represent the words, changing as each new idea in the lyrics calls for a corresponding visual image.

To be sure, the presentation, especially with music, is a blatant ploy to hook student emotions in order to arouse their interest. But there is also extensive content inherent in the visual images and lyrics. After showing five minutes of 20–25 slides to accompany two haunting Harry Chapin songs on what has happened to America since the 1960s, we go back over each slide and talk about the historical context and the meaning of each line of the lyrics, which students have on a handout. The discussion could last for hours. Sometimes though, it is better for the emotional impact of the music and images to conclude the class, letting students leave the room with their hearts thumping, their minds engaged, and their motivation to study aroused. Which, after all, has been the goal of each of these lecture variations.

It must be clear that putting together a slide-tape presentation, or a small group role-playing experience, or

even a participatory lecture, takes planning time and effort, probably about as much as an exquisite oral essay or even an ordinary lecture, the one we know "could have been better but will have to do." It is important to use *all* of these different variations of the lecture, broadening our options as teachers by selecting what works for us. "The test of a good teacher," someone has said, "is how well Plan B works." To have a good Plan B for each major concept implies, of course, enlarging our repertoire.

Above all, I have sought to show in this article that large lecture hall classes need not be barriers to providing the kind of interactive, participatory experiences that enhance student learning and renew faculty commitment to the highest challenges of our calling. And who knows, after using a variety of approaches which involve students actively in the classroom, one could even finish a 30-minute lecture to a large class and ask, "Any questions?"—and be pleasantly surprised by the response.

#### NOTES

1. See *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community*, Association of American Colleges, 1985; *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*, National Institute of Education, 1984; and William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984.
2. Wilbert J. McKeachie, *Teaching Tips—A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher*, 6th edition (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1969), p. 36.
3. Bette LaSere and Glenn R. Erickson, "Presenting and Explaining," unpublished manuscript, University of Rhode Island Instructional Development Program, 1984, p. 1.
4. Heather Dubrow and James Wilkinson, "The Theory and Practice of Lectures," in *The Art and Craft of Teaching*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, ed., Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 25.
5. Dubrow and Wilkinson, *Art and Craft of Teaching*, p. 25.
6. Bette LaSere Erickson and Glenn Erickson's "Presenting and Explaining" contains an excellent set of specific "recommendations for planning effective presentations," p. 9.
7. David Bergman, "In Defense of Lecturing," *Association of Departments of English Bulletin* 76 (Winter, 1983), pp. 49-50.
8. Martin J. Finkelstein, *The American Academic Profession—A Synthesis of Social Scientific Inquiry Since World War II* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), pp. 109 ff.
9. Peter Frederick, "The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start," *Improving College and University Teaching* 29 (Summer 1981), 109-14.