

## TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR ENHANCING LECTURING IN HISTORY

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It can be **boring, monotonous, miseducational ...**

OR

It can be **motivating, intellectually stimulating, fun ...**

Consistent and constant criticism of the lecture method remains a staple of discussion and writing in academia. And most of the time it's deserved! The lecture has a history dating back to the first time that people needed to disseminate information.<sup>1</sup> The birth and expansion of the early universities of the middle ages saw the growth of the lecture as a means to transfer knowledge. Fortunately it was joined at many colleges by "disputation," usually conducted once a week. This permitted students to engage in questions and discussion with the master (the "professor"). Despite Johann Gutenberg's invention of moveable type permitting greater distribution of knowledge, the lecture lived on. As institutions of higher learning greatly expanded worldwide in the following several centuries (particularly the twentieth), commitment to the lecture has shown no sign of slowing. Those interested in improving this aspect of their teaching might wish to consider some or all of the following suggestions for enhancing their lectures.

### I. Lectures must start with a "grabber."

Regardless of class size, motivation remains a major prerequisite of an effective lecture. Projecting a quote, a chart, a short reading, a problem, or a political cartoon and asking thought provoking questions provides an "anticipatory set" for learners. This permits (encourages, perhaps even forces) students to focus and react mentally. The professor should then integrate it into the presentation. In some cases there can be some benefit to e-mailing the "grabber" (aka "bell ringer") prior to class depending upon the course, lesson, and students. "Suggestions for teaching with excellence" in the "Berkeley Compendium" from the University of California at Berkeley advises teachers to "Plan the beginnings and endings of your lectures so that you can 'Open with Gusto' and 'Finish Strong.'"<sup>2</sup>

Historical cartoons are valuable "grabbers." Projecting an illustration on a screen as students arrive in class focuses attention upon the day's topic. One proviso: Spend

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<sup>1</sup>Coolie Vermer and Gary Dickinson, "The Lecture: An Analysis and Review of Research," *Adult Education*, 17 (1967), 94.

<sup>2</sup>Berkeley Compendium, <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/compendium/suggestions/file212.html>.

some time instructing the class on interpretation skills prior to using this methodology; this will enable students to operate at a higher cognitive level. I have identified some steps necessary to promote critical thinking through historical cartoon interpretation in a series of articles. I suggest exposing students initially to concepts such as caricature, symbolism, and satire and then after some instruction and practice proceeding to more sophisticated activities. The latter would include providing the class with a cartoon that omits the caption (title) and/or dialogue and asking them to provide the caption/dialogue with a justification of their position. This is critical thinking at its finest!<sup>3</sup> A number of websites offer cartoons on current happenings and a number of books provide classic selections.<sup>4</sup>

Starting class with a “grabber” satisfies the demands of students that William Mugleston has identified in his research that “students would like classes to be stimulating, entertaining, *interactive*, not boring and have short breaks when there are long lectures” (author’s italics).<sup>5</sup> The “bell ringer” political cartoon strategy is a powerful instructional and behavioral strategy encouraging students to stop talking with friends, close their laptops, focus on the visual, and think.

## II. Lectures must be interactive.

In today’s world, interactivity is a component of everyday life for our students, ranging from iphones to e-mail to Twitter to the Web. Might clickers (personal response systems) be an option to consider—time will tell; YouTube certainly deserves serious consideration. How can a lecturer tap into this world for instructional benefit of students? Using occasional quizzes, asking discussion prompting questions, and providing problems for students to solve in class can assist in avoiding passive non-participation, but there is much more.

Visual aids, particularly film, provide opportunities for interaction with students. For example, when showing a video stop periodically and ask questions rather than wait until the end of the film. The instructor might write a series of questions on the board or e-mail them to students prior to class. Some teachers provide students with

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<sup>3</sup>Ray Heitzmann, “The Power of Political Cartoons in Teaching History,” National Council for History Education: An Occasional Paper (1998); Ray Heitzmann, “Looking at Elections through the Cartoonists’ Eyes,” *Social Education*, 64 (September/October 2002), 314-319; and Ray Heitzmann, “Historical Cartoons: Opportunities to Motivate and to Educate,” *Middle States Council for the Social Studies Journal* (Spring 1990), 11.

<sup>4</sup>For example, for daily cartoons, see <http://www.Cagle.com> and <http://www.Slate.com>. See the National Archives website at <http://archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/index.html> for useful worksheets to accompany various types of documents, including cartoons.

<sup>5</sup>William F. Mugleston, “‘If Teacher Would Only ...’ How Students View Their College Experience,” *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 31 (Fall 2006), 86-89.

a one-page handout with questions as they come into class. Students prepare answers and turn them in at the end of the class (at the end of the film) for assessment and grading. This works particularly well with students in the habit of napping during a film.

Case methodology can enhance teacher-student and student-student interactions. Carefully introducing a case focused upon dilemmas from history (e.g. approving the Treaty of Versailles or dropping the atomic bombs on Japan) can energize the class, resulting in excited interactions and of course motivation and learning. Case methodology has a long history of success in colleges, but it must be used with care to maximize its success.<sup>6</sup> The creation of a positive classroom atmosphere remains a key to providing a climate for learning, and interactive lessons can be a major contribution to do this.

### III. Lectures must not rehearse the textbook.

History textbooks serve as repositories for a particular segment of knowledge; in a survey course they provide a large component of the information. To encourage students to use their textbooks, professors should make frequent references to texts. Most importantly, they should carefully select parts of the text to use as a springboard to an in-depth explanation of an event. The following focuses upon some approaches.

In his classic *Social Studies: Theory and Practice* (1937), Edgar Bruce Wesley described the traditional lecture as "placing the learner in a passive position, restricting his activity to listening or note taking."<sup>7</sup> Wesley's advice initially appears antithetical to this Third Commandment. However, Francis McMann pointed out that the lecture is "not incompatible" with new methods of teaching: "The criticisms of the lecture approach are not so much that the lecture method is inherently deficient but *the method has been badly abused* and narrowly defined" (author's italics). McMann further suggested that "After being introduced to a series of interpretations students can be given opportunities to develop their own varying historical interpretations or to validate a specific interpretation." He offered the following "historical model" for faculty to follow:

1. Historical Issue
2. Author and Source
3. Interpretation
4. Supporting Evidence
5. Refuting Evidence
6. Assumptions

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<sup>6</sup>For guidelines, see Ray Heitzmann, "Case Study Methodology and Teaching Critical Thinking: Challenges, Charms, and Cooperation," *The National Social Science Journal*, 35, N. 2 (2007).

<sup>7</sup>Edgar Bruce Wesley, *Social Studies: Theory and Practice* (New York: D.C. Heath, 1937), 500-528.

7. Logical Consistency

8. Fallacies

9. Questions<sup>8</sup>

This strategy liberates students from the bondage of passive behavior so common in traditional lecture-plus-textbook-based pedagogy. Kenneth Stunkel suggests that some students tune out after ten minutes of a lecture.<sup>9</sup> Given that instructors of history wish to educate all students, we must keep their attention and remember that textbooks should serve as an important supplement to lectures, not vice versa. Interactive lectures mitigate against this unfortunate passive behavior.

#### **IV. Lectures must represent the latest thinking and research.**

This Fourth Commandment defines the essence of the scholar-educator who shares new developments in the field with students. Diane Halpern observed that "most university professors do not know how to teach critical thinking ... to be effective ... they must engage their students in active learning in active learning techniques." Halpern suggests avoiding the "sage on the stage role."<sup>10</sup> For one solution, the instructor can model how scholars of history frame questions and pursue answers through decision-making and problem-solving. Students can utilize this model in their work, internalizing critical thinking as an academic and personal skill. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" serves as a nice case study. The instructor can present the historical background, Turner's ideas, and his justification, and then offer opposing positions of historians. This case study utilizing historiography demonstrates how scholars develop new knowledge based upon serious research and reflection, a scenario students can and should mimic.<sup>11</sup>

#### **V. Lectures must contain humor.**

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<sup>8</sup>Francis McMann, Jr., "In Defense of Lecture," *The Social Studies*, 70 (November/December 1979), 270-71.

<sup>9</sup>Kenneth Stunkel, "The Lecture: A Powerful Tool for Intellectual Liberation," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 26, 1988.

<sup>10</sup>Diane F. Halpern, *Changing College Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>Ray Allen Billington, *The Frontier Thesis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1996).

History teachers have an advantage over colleagues in other fields. History houses a wealth of stories that provide amusing anecdotes.<sup>12</sup> But there are caveats. Taste dictates a note of caution relative to the selection and explanation of "stories," particularly those that fall into the domain of "legend" as opposed to "fact." Accuracy should pervade all realms of teaching, including classroom humor. Recognizing that positive physiological and psychological benefits result from humor, "comic relief" can and should form a natural part of the history classroom.

Professors agree that students prefer a friendly style and respond positively to it. Furthermore, research endorses the use of humor in the college classroom. Powell and Anderson found that humor increases student attention.<sup>13</sup> Korobkin's research endorses this point, listing benefits such as "attentiveness and interest, positive student-teacher rapport, improved individual and group productivity ... and most importantly retention of material."<sup>14</sup> Many instructors have observed that humor decreases academic stress and anxiety. Parrott cautions instructors in this regard: "Avoid some of the pitfalls, such as ridicule, sarcasm, and racist or ethnic jokes."<sup>15</sup> I would add "No sexist jokes!" Often at the end of the day watching a JibJab cartoon on line can amuse and edify the most tired history instructor.<sup>16</sup> Might not this be true also for students at the end of a class?

## VI. Lectures must humanize history and the social sciences.

Integrating biographies of the famous, the infamous, and, just as importantly, ordinary men and women into one's teaching brings to life historical events as well as activities in other disciplines. Individual lives can become stories for our classrooms. Talk about presidents such as Ulysses S. Grant, Teddy Roosevelt, and Bill Clinton; international leaders Catherine the Great, Liliuokalani, Winston Churchill, and Golda Meir; activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Delores Huerta, and Mary Lease who advised farmers "to raise less corn and more hell." In telling about the impact of rainfall on communities, discussing a family faced with water

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<sup>12</sup>See James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), and Paul McBride, "The Pheasants Shot the Archduck' and Other Historical Truths," *Teaching History*, 12 (Spring 1987).

<sup>13</sup>J. Powell and L. Anderson, "Humor and Teaching in Higher Education," *Studies in Higher Education*, 10 (1985), 79-80.

<sup>14</sup>Debra Korobkin, "Humor in the Classroom: Considerations and Strategies," *College Teaching*, 36 (Fall 1988).

<sup>15</sup>Thena Parrott, "Humor as a Teaching Strategy," *Nurse Educator*, 19 (May 1994).

<sup>16</sup>See the collection of cartoons at <http://www.jibjab.com/>.

shortages assists with motivation and retention while providing insights to historical events. Snippets from a video such as "Surviving the Dust Bowl" from PBS's American Experience series would be magical in this regard. Local history offers another special and unique way to share the exploits of people who have contributed locally and nationally.<sup>17</sup>

### VII. Lectures must respect the audience by utilizing students' multiple intelligences and learning styles.

Research from educational psychology suggests that faculty should consider students' individual differences in preparation and delivery of lectures. Presentations enhanced with visuals, sound, and class interaction enable students to increase their learning, understanding, retention, and enjoyment of history by tapping into multiple intelligences and addressing diverse learning styles:

- Visual Learners—Learn through seeing
- Auditory Learners—Learn through listening
- Tactile/Kinesthetic Learners—Learn through moving, touching<sup>18</sup>

Howard Gardner provides guidance to faculty with his models of the intellect. His categories include the following:

- Logical/Mathematical: Numbers, Clear Thinking
- Verbal/Linguistic: Writing, Poetry
- Rhythmic/Musical: Creating, Enjoying Music
- Bodily/Kinesthetic: Physical World, Athletics
- Interpersonal: Understanding Working With Others
- Visual/Spatial: Mental View of Relationship
- Naturalistic: Nature, Botany, Zoology
- Emotional: Maturity
- Spiritual: World Beyond Oneself, Religion<sup>19</sup>

Those of us who teach history enjoy numerous advantages. In addition to the information and anecdotes, serious and amusing, provided by the teacher, the World Wide Web can be a valuable resource. The WWW offers a fantastic video and still photographic collection of speeches, interviews, media coverage of events, and related information to enhance students' understanding of history and assist faculty to achieve lesson and course objectives. In addition, numerous audio recordings exist. Websites

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<sup>17</sup>For example, see Judith Luckett, "Local Studies and Larger Issues: The Case of Sara Bagby," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 27 (Fall 2002), 86-97.

<sup>18</sup>"Learning Styles: Take Your Test," <http://www.ldpride.net/learningstyles.ML.htm>.

<sup>19</sup>Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 5-12. Other researchers have added to Gardner's ideas, thus expanding the theory.

such as History.com and socialstudies.com both offer wonderful selections of supplemental materials for the instructor and student.

Picture the following: The professor begins class with some background information and then shows a short video snippet on the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, leading to a series of questions for the class. Accordingly, this introduction (“grabber”) to a lesson on the origins of World War I could be followed by additional biographical information on the Archduke and the Habsburg Dynasty. Developing a DVD library enables the instructor to enrich students’ understanding.<sup>20</sup>

### VIII: Lectures must be interdisciplinary.

Just as historians utilize interdisciplinary methods in their research, teachers of history can use many bodies of knowledge to support their pedagogy. Consider the unique contributions that each of the humanities (art, literature, music, philosophy, religion, and others) and social sciences (anthropology, economics, geography, political science, psychology, sociology, and others) can add to the learning environment. They can enhance investigation of issues as well as understanding of events. No other discipline is as blessed as history in its ability to utilize the resources of other disciplines.

To give some examples: Historians who teach a course or part of a course on geography can lend its approach through the teacher reading excerpts of a primary source document such as Giovanni de Verrazano’s commentary upon first arriving at the mouth of the Hudson River area in 1524.<sup>21</sup> Teachers can draw from economics for analysis of the slave trade, and from sociology for insight about life on Southern plantations. American maritime history can tap the literature of the sea, perhaps having students read a classic such as *Two Years Before the Mast* to provide a picture of life at sea during the days of “wooden ships and iron men and women.” Marine art provides primary evidence of maritime activities and life on the lakes, rivers, and ports, and along coastal areas; film and photography likewise make important contributions. The music of sea shanties and scrimshaw art tell tales of life of the mariner as does the poetry of the sea.<sup>22</sup> The following websites should prove beneficial for integrating maritime history teaching: [www.maritimehistory.info](http://www.maritimehistory.info), [boatlinks.com/boatlink.html](http://boatlinks.com/boatlink.html), [www.shipindex.org](http://www.shipindex.org), and [www.hhpl.on.ca/greatlakes/homeport.asp](http://www.hhpl.on.ca/greatlakes/homeport.asp). Interdisciplinary

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<sup>20</sup>The History Channel (<http://www.history.com>) has an extensive collection of quality DVDs for the classroom, many at reasonable prices.

<sup>21</sup>Susan Tarrow, in Lawrence. C. Wroth, editor, *The Voyages of Giovanni de Verrazano: 1524-1528* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 133-143.

<sup>22</sup>Ray Heitzmann, “America’s Maritime History: A Frequently Forgotten Teaching Treasure,” National Council for History Education: An Occasional Paper (March 2007).

and multidisciplinary approaches clearly provide rich insights to enhance student understanding.

### IX. Lectures must motivate, challenge, and inspire.

The eminent historian John Hope Franklin recalled in his autobiography the "riveting lectures" he experienced at Fisk College that opened the door to his lifelong love of history. His instructor, Theodore S. Currier, "gave riveting lectures on European and American history, embellished with anecdotes concerning real, live characters, ranging from kings and queens to prime ministers and presidents to industrial giants to common laborers; his lectures raised questions of how and why events occurred."<sup>23</sup> Franklin decided on history as a major, and his students (including this author) and the nation are richer for it. Perhaps another Franklin sits in our classes awaiting inspiration to appreciate history and assist others in its enjoyment.

As college teaching moves from the professor's role as "the sage on the stage" to "a guide by the side," we have opportunities to market history and ourselves.<sup>24</sup> This changing pedagogical paradigm, emphasizing student learning as opposed to our teaching, permits instructors to challenge students intellectually, perhaps inspiring them to take advanced coursework and graduate studies. Pacing of instruction through visuals, props, questions, and more should be keyed to the non-verbal behavior of students. Carefully utilizing questions, reading quotations, or planning teacher movements can stimulate a class that might start to drift. Often a positive comment in class or an encouraging annotation on a paper or test can serve as a preemptive motivational strategy.

Consider the following in terms of teacher behavior and instructional style. Echoing a point made earlier, Thomas Wenzel, a professor at Bates College, reviewed the literature on student attention during lectures: "Student attention decreases as the lecture proceeds ... students did well assimilating for five minutes after which confusion or boredom reduced attentiveness." He noted "a revival of interest" near the end of class.<sup>25</sup>

Class size can dictate how a professor will challenge students; in smaller groups the lecturette (at 15-20 minutes) is a natural. This setting permits an instructor to springboard into discussion involving most students. But teachers can challenge

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<sup>23</sup>John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Grove, 2005), 44-45.

<sup>24</sup>Ray Heitzmann, "Ten Steps to Classroom Success," *Middle Studies Council for the Social Studies Journal*, 1998 Yearbook, 155-158.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas J. Wenzel, "The Lecture as a Learning Device," *Analytical Chemistry News & Features* (December 1, 1999), 817-819.



students even in large-group settings. Even with a "large class in a fixed-seat sloped lecture hall," Peter Frederick reported success:

Not all students talk, to be sure, unless I ask them to take five minutes and talk about a (primary) source in a pair or trios first before inviting the whole class to comment ... I have chosen to use this class time for helping students learn the important skills of doing history rather than covering content ... these methods of engaged, deep learning, usually thought to be possible only in tutorial or small class, can occur even in large classes.<sup>26</sup>

Frederick challenges his students with pedagogy "outside the box." This learning experience encourages them to think critically and inspire them to appreciate history.

#### **X. Lectures must summarize and preview the next lecture.**

My Tenth Commandment contradicts the recommendation of David Kennedy, who suggested in an article entitled "How to Lecture" that "When you get to the end stop, I mean it! No postscripts. No afterthoughts. Let it go."<sup>27</sup> Times have changed in the new world of learning that emphasizes what students have learned rather than information delivery. This major sea change embraces and expects summarization (or closure in education jargon) to enhance learning and retention and asking questions at the close of class, hinting that some of them might appear on a future quiz or test, to assess student learning on the spot. Some teachers require students to turn in an index card at the beginning of the next class or at the close of a class, drawing from that day's materials, posing a question about material from the class; instructors might use these for test or quiz questions or as a "grabber" at the beginning of class.<sup>28</sup> This provides nice linkage between classes. An end of class review and assessment can also mitigate the frenzied closing of laptops and the rush to escape as class ends.

A technique successfully used by the media to tease an audience to continue to watch or listen or tune in the next show can provide another motivational and learning strategy. For example, consider the following scenarios: "For the first half of the next class a librarian will be here to assist you with your research paper and to answer related questions" or "I will be showing the first few minutes of a 'Saturday Night

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<sup>26</sup>Peter J. Frederick, "Engaging Students Actively in Large Lecture Settings" in *Engaging Large Classes* (Bolton, MA: Anker, 2002), 61, 65, and Peter Frederick, "Active Learning in History Classes," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 16 (Fall 1991), 67-83.

<sup>27</sup>David M. Kennedy, "How to Give a Lecture," *History Matters*, 14 (September 2001), 5.

<sup>28</sup>"The One Minute Paper," [http://www.cuspomona.edu/~biology/teaching\\_bytes/one-minute-paper.pdf](http://www.cuspomona.edu/~biology/teaching_bytes/one-minute-paper.pdf).

Live' skit on Congress and separation of powers at the beginning of the next class prior to our discussion of checks and balances." Those would be another kind of "grabber."

### Conclusion

Can a teaching strategy—the lecture—that is centuries old, most recently having undergone decades of criticism, survive in the twenty-first century? The answer is "yes" if the pedagogy moves from teacher-centered to student-centered and incorporates some of the suggested Commandments. Of course, the whole process works (perhaps only works) when the lecturer is dynamic, confident, highly motivated, and most importantly enthusiastic.<sup>29</sup> While difficult to define, Gephart and others provide the following list of concepts of what make up an operational definition of enthusiasm: quality vocal delivery, good eye contact (not staring), natural body movement, strong gestures, vibrant facial expressions, high descriptive word selection, acceptance and encouragement of ideas, and finally an exuberant energy level.<sup>30</sup> Armed with these components the task of implementing the Commandments, while a demanding task, will result in much personal and student satisfaction.

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<sup>29</sup>Keith W. Prichard and R. McLaran Sawyer, *Handbook of College Teaching: Theory and Applications* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 91.

<sup>30</sup>William Gephart, Deborah B. Strother, and Willard R. Duckett, "Enthusiasm," *Practical Applications of Research*, 3, No. 4 (1981), 1, 4.