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Delivering Your First Lecture

Academia can seem full of daunting events and intense experiences. Arguably, the first lecture is one of the most stressful milestones in the journey from doctoral candidate to fully fledged academic. In most institutions, the most common teaching trajectory is seminar/small group leading during the mid-to-late stages of the PhD, with first lectures given during the first experience of convening a module. However, with the rise in hourly paid and precarious labour covering more and more University teaching, this milestone can come earlier in the career, often at very short notice and without significant preparation time or guidance.

I gave my first lecture ten years ago and I was terrified: I delivered a 7000 word script in 42 minutes! Now I love lecturing and give, on average, 4 hours of lectures a week during the teaching term. The anxiety this initially generated for me, and others (as seen here) belies the lack of training of first time HE teachers for the components of their job, some of which require very different skills than others.

Lecturing can be a particularly tricky skill to develop, especially if your role models don't resemble you. The cultural baggage of the 'sage on the stage' (traditionally a white, male, older Prof) can be difficult to overcome, but it can be done.

To hold the attention of a large group of individuals, many of whom are 18-21, is no mean feat and you will develop into your style as you progress during your career. You will also find your own habits of speaking (mine: enthusiastic arm flapping) and develop ways to prepare lectures at speed. You will never prepare for a lecture as much as you will for your first.

First Principles:

- It is not a Research Seminar: your students don't need to marvel at your brilliance and your lecture doesn't have to exhaustively critique every source in the field. Make sure your reading lists are up to date and your bibliography is clear, and the good students will look for sources afterwards.

- Your job is to spark their ideas: instead of advancing one strong argument, offer different perspectives and ways of looking at a text. At the end of the module, you want to read thoughtful essays that challenge critical thinking on a subject and, at their best, advance our field.
- Many people suggest that you make an outline to make yourself less stiff rather than a full script. I think you should do what makes you feel more relaxed. After my first lecture debacle, I began to write shorter and shorter scripts and eventually forgot about them and just have a chat now. If you're not there, yet, don't worry. If you need to write a script in order to forget about it, then so be it.
- Get a trusted, kind colleague to sit in and give you feedback if they have time. Mine helped me slow down and explain key terms. In our age of TEF, most institutions have dedicated teaching and learning staff. Find out if yours are a good lot and, if so, get them to give you further feedback. Like all feedback: use your common sense.
- We are not children's party entertainers and not everyone is naturally funny. Don't beat yourself up if your jokes are rubbish (although most students will laugh out of kindness) or if you're not some order of charismatic superstar. You'll find a way to be comfortable and be yourself over time. Often the flashiest speakers have haphazard content. Structure your lectures well and notes from your lectures will be favoured come revision season.

Technology:

- No matter how prestigious your institution might be, the AV will fail on you at multiple different times during your career. You might be able to get a nice technician on the phone to fix the problem but always be prepared for what you might do if all the technology decides it hates you. I once had to give a lecture on Dadaism while getting the students to look up paintings on their phones.
- Don't try out a technological tool you haven't used before. Your digital skills office might be able to arrange for you to try out the room before with your tech.
- In two hour lectures, it is advisable to give students a break between the hours but also I like to show some clips to break things up. Nothing too long, as the students aren't there for something they could get at home, but we are very lucky in contemporary literary and cultural studies to have lots of available resources of author interviews and political clips. Personally, I show a short relevant clip (2-3 mins) for every half hour of lecture time. Also, in two hour lecture blocks I like to build in some close reading to get them doing something active.

Students

- Some of them will look bored, some of them are definitely checking social media on their devices. Find three friendly looking ones, and bounce your eye contact between them if

indifference makes you nervous. You don't know what's going on in their lives: that grumpy looking student might be keeping a home and family together and still managing to attend. In my experience, a bit of kindness helps with a mardy student quicker than an egotistical reprimand.

- Find out from the module leader if any of the students have disabilities that you need to know about in the lecture hall. You won't always receive this information in advance but it will help you make the lecture a positive experience for both you and the student if you can help with their needs by using a recorder or being prepared for unexpected issues.
- I know this might be controversial but manage any students who are talking in that room if they are being disruptive. The other students in the room might have been through hell to make it in the room that day and it is your job to ensure that everyone is able to have a pleasant learning experience. I just go silent and look at the offender until they realise, and then say 'Thank You' with a big smile.
- Your students will have variable needs and abilities. Often, as academics, we were very good students, borderline insufferable literature nerds. Not everyone is like this: many are just trying to get a decent degree. I try to think of my lectures as building in terms of difficulty during the hour: I begin gently, then layer on more complex ideas. Not everyone will follow all the way, but hopefully everyone will come away with something.

On the Day:

- Save your notes so you can get them online if you accidentally leave your script on the breakfast table.
- Bring a bottle of water with a secure lid so you don't throw it over yourself or the AV.
- All that walking around and adrenalin will make you feel quite warm, so layer up.
- Wear something comfortable: definitely no new shoes. I prefer minimal jewellery so I don't have to disentangle my hair from my earrings while trying to make a sensible point about Heidegger.
- Do one last check in the bathroom mirror before you start so you have no remnants of lunch on your lapel, your flies are done and your skirt isn't tucked into your tights (all have happened to friends).

Peer Advice in 280 Characters or less:

I asked Twitter what tips they might offer a first-time lecturer and I've selected the ones (below) which I thought were the most illuminating:

- A reminder that at the end of the day you're telling them a story (about theoretical concepts, about events, about culture). Practically? You're going to sweat. Literally. Enough to fill a bucket. Dark coloured tops/shirts a good idea until the nerves disappear. (Shannon Smith)

- Be prepared for clips not to work, slides to freeze, and to forget parts of what you planned to say - and in the grand scheme these things don't really matter! (Helen Ringrow)
- Make eye contact with at least one person. Visit room beforehand & check you can work technology. Dress for comfort & prepare for room to feel 20 degrees warmer for you than everyone else. (Philip McGowan)
- If you can, visit the room in advance. Try and check if the tech works as soon as you can and/or know who you can contact if it doesn't work. Not a bad idea to have plan up your sleeve should the tech break. (Eoin Price)
- Take a glass with you to drink your water (etc) from. Stopping to open the bottle, pour, and take a sip is a nice way of punctuating the lecture and creates a bit of space. (Benjamin Poore)
- To make sure that your final section can be truncated without risking student's understanding. You almost certainly will run out of time, not material. Also even if you checked your tech earlier it will probs mess up so prep a student activity to distract while you flail and faff. (Alexandra Campbell)
- It's not a research paper - stop trying to jam every possible secondary source in just to prove you can. (To be honest, I still need this advice.) (Timothy Baker)
- Don't try to write a conference paper. It doesn't need an argument with clever twists & turns, but to introduce key points of a subject. (Hannah Boast)
- You are human, and that's ok! Students don't want a robot teaching them - you will probably make mistakes, lose your train of thought, drop things, fight with technology - laugh it off and move on. (Oonagh Murphy)
- "'Showbiz scared' is not the same thing as 'shark attack scared.'" (Jack Fennell)

This Help Sheet has intentionally focused on some things that could potentially go wrong but overwhelmingly my experience of lecturing has been one of enjoyment: I get antsy if I haven't been in the classroom for a bit. When you knock a lecture out of the park there is no feeling like it and you don't know how far your ideas will keep travelling. Some years later someone will remind you of a lecture that you've forgotten but that changed their life, and thank you. Once you get your training wheels off and have a few broken projectors under your belt, there will be no stopping you!

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