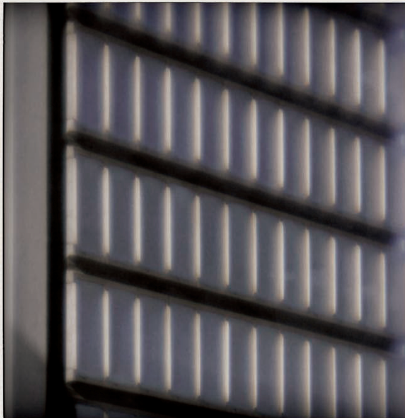
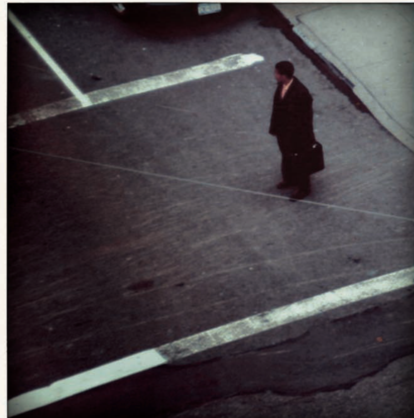
Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere





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The Researching And Teaching Communication Series

Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

The intellectual work of the 2011 ECREA European media and communication doctoral summer school

Ljubljana, 2011

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EUROPEAN MEDIASPHERE.
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How to teach interactively large classrooms: a participation-focused approach

Pille Pruulman-Vengerfeldt

1. Why we need to consider interactive teaching and large classrooms

In more and more cases, universities across Europe are struggling with McDonaldisation, a keyword coined by Ritzer (2008) in his The McDonaldization of Society. The key idea is that universities are becoming like fast-food restaurants, with ever more instrumentally rationalised processes, and with standardisation and efficiency as the key concepts. And although this notion is criticised, the concept has become widely used and popular in describing many aspects of society (e.g. Kellner, 1998), higher education among them (e.g. Garland, 2008). The European Commission (2003) proposes six challenges for modern European universities:

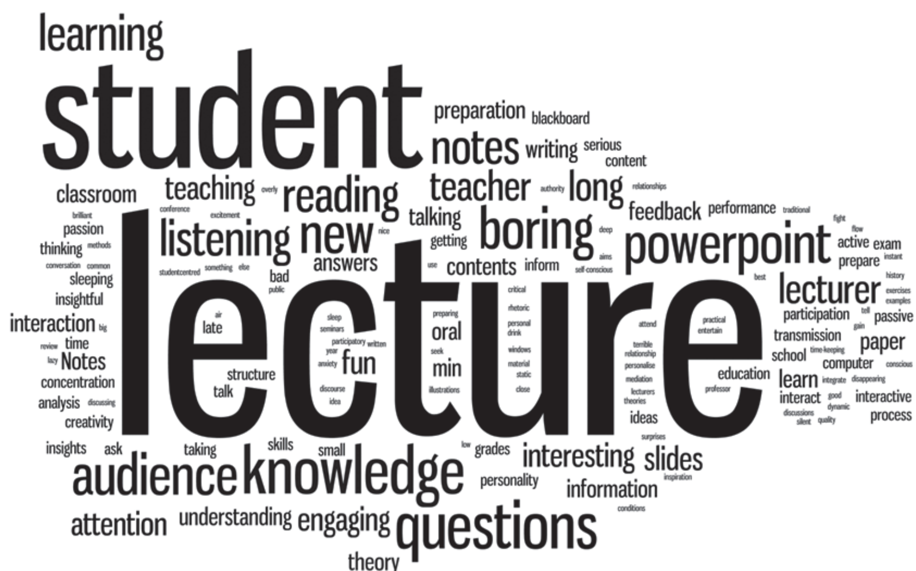
- Increased demand for higher education
- The internationalisation of education and research
- To develop effective and close cooperation between universities and industry
- The proliferation of places where knowledge is produced
- The reorganisation of knowledge
- The emergence of new expectations

Of these, the first one focuses on the fact that Europe will in the near future need to teach more and more students, and will need to do so in an increasingly cost-effective way. Given the idea that university education should be accessible to more and more people, there is the potential for an increasing number of people in the classroom. For lecturers, this creates a challenge, as classes are becoming larger. Often, this results in reverting to what is considered to be a safe and secure academic practice – lectur-

ing. In many cases lecturing is considered to be the only way to cover enough material in such large classrooms while ensuring that students will learn all that is necessary. In addition, lecturing is more often than not considered to be an easy option – to have full control, to be well prepared, to stick to the notes and to deliver. In many cases, academics use the students' passiveness as an excuse not to do anything beyond knowledge transmission in a "broadcast mode" of information delivery.

The ECREA European Media and Communication Summer School 2011 workshop/lecture on interactive lecturing attempted to overcome some of those preconceived notions on lecturing while drawing on the vast diversity of the participants' experiences. Participants were asked to draw a quick mind map focusing on the keyword 'lecture'. The results are summarised in Figure 1, where, using a simple word count, the words mentioned more often are depicted in larger type. This quick illustration shows how lectures should first and foremost be about the students, but too often they are also at the same time about boring deliveries of PowerPoint slides for the purpose of transmitting knowledge.

Figure 1: Illustration based on mind maps gathered on the topic of lecturing at the ECREA European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School in Ljubljana 2011.



In this chapter, I will attempt to provide a few ideas and also reasons as to why one should avoid reverting to the broadcast mode of lecturing, even in the largest of classrooms, and how to manage interaction, engagement and participation using pedagogical tools and tricks. The aim is to support student learning, based on the assumption that the lecture is one of the worst modes of information delivery, as the classic saying by Confucius claims: "*I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand*". But before I continue with specific examples as to how to foster learning through supporting students in the beginning, middle and end of the lecture, I will briefly link up the discussion on lecturing with the theoretical concept of participation. I will finish the chapter with a few words about technical support for interactive lectures and conclude with notes on best practice vs. good practice.

2. True participation

The title of this chapter suggests a focus on interaction, but I would like briefly to outline why we should consider participation to be a more appropriate aim. Carpentier (2007) highlights that we can and should consider democracy outside the minimalist approach of political institution, and follow Giddens' (1998) call to democratise democracy. Giddens proposes that schools should become one of the institutions where democracy is opened up in order to foster the larger democratisation of society. In my understanding, introducing participatory techniques into a learning environment supports student learning by increasing their motivation and empowers them through the possibility of goal-setting. At the same time, it is also relevant to general civic education as, if done in a caring and meaningful way, we can teach students methods of participatory engagement through practice.

Dahlgren (2006: 24) helps us understand some of the key terms: "Engagement generally refers to subject states […] mobilised, focused attention." Thus an interactive lecture can support student engagement by consciously working in order to support student focus. The idea that a normal attention span in the classroom is approximately 20 minutes (Middendorf and Kalish, 1996) means that some sort of change of pace in lecturing should ideally happen regularly, in order to support students handling the flow of information. Dahlgren (2006) sees engagement as a prerequisite for participation, as the latter would be "connecting with practical, do-able situations, where citizens can feel empowered […] it involves in some sense 'activity'". Thus participation in a lecture enables students to rise beyond

the state of engaged listener, and, through relevant and meaningful contribution, they are able to support their own and peer learning.

While traditional lecturing can be viewed from IAP2, i.e. International Association for Public Participation, (2007) as the stage of informing, there are many techniques that enable us to move beyond that level. Indeed, while the differences in knowledge of the field and experience and indeed support by structured study programmes mean that it is very difficult to have a truly equal distribution of power in the classroom, to a certain extent consultation, engagement, partnership and empowerment are all possible.

First, empowerment and support for democratic engagement in the classroom start with the notion of mutual respect. This means that questions in the classroom make sense only if the lecturer truly wants to know the answer. In an ideal world, participatory activities in the classroom should support the learning of not just one individual, the participant, but also be beneficial to others – the audience and even the teacher. Brainstorming or consensus-seeking in groups can be ways of dealing with such empowerment techniques in larger classrooms. In order to handle the issues of reporting back to the whole class, the discussion reports can be 1) written and shared via digital technologies; 2) several rounds of group work can be conducted in order to reduce the number of individual groups working on the issue; or 3) just a few groups are asked to report, while others can add to their contribution in the hope that there will be voluntary additions from others.

The trick is to set the right kind of questions. If the questions are too simple, then those feel rather more like rhetorical questions, where the pause before answering seems more a rhetorical stance than really wanting to know the answer. If the questions are factual, then engagement feels more like a test of knowledge, and, given the feeling that there is a correct answer in the lecturer's head, this will be an inhibition to answering. Thus, interaction exercises work well in situations where there are multiple correct answers, where multiple viewpoints are needed in order to support comprehension and where the lecturer is confident that students are able to respond to these challenges.

To borrow from another field where the practicalities of participation are being discussed, Simon (2010), in her book about "Participatory museum", has written about five stages of social participation, which range

from 'me' (where an individual consumes content) to 'we' (where individuals engage with each other and the institution becomes a social place full of enriching and challenging encounters). The stages in between help to link the visitor in the museum or in our current discussion, the student in the classroom to the content, and through the content also to others: visitors/peer students. This view is supported by Dahlgren (2006), for whom both participation and engagement are anchored in the individual, although they also have an important collective dimension as they imply being connected to others via civic bonds. Many learning theories (e.g. Salomon and Perkins, 1998) also stress the notions of collective learning as a relevant concept, as peer support and peer engagement become necessary prerequisites for effective learning.

While designing a participatory lecture, where students' input becomes a relevant part of the lecture, it is important to strike a positive balance between student-led content and lecturer input. In many instances, although the lecturer might feel that, for instance, covering the applications of some theoretical concepts outside academia is done well by student groups and there is little for him/her to add as a lecturer, some summary, wrap-up or reinforcement of the key ideas are still necessary. As the voice of authority still has a great deal of meaning in the academic hierarchy, participatory lectures where the student voice is louder than the lecturer's will leave some students disappointed, as they feel neglected by the lecturer. A healthy balance between exercises which provide input from the students, and the lecturer's authoritative voice repeating, correcting or adding to their input, is often more necessary than giving the floor to each student. This is also very relevant in large classroom situations, as a lecturer can make a public comment only on one smaller group's work, and ask the rest of the class to correct their group work accordingly.

Giving feedback is an important part of empowering student learning. This can be extremely difficult in large classrooms, as the lecturer might not have time to give feedback to all group work. This often discourages lecturers from using group exercise in larger classrooms, as they do not know what the groups have come up with and how correct it is. Sometimes, bachelor level students in particular have difficulty in translating the feedback given to one student or general comments made to the whole classroom as being appropriate to them. Although I still feel that it is very useful to use general feedback and stress that everyone should find the relevant comments for their individual work, collecting students' work for corrections outside the classroom does generate extra work for the lec-

turers, but is in most cases highly appreciated by students. Using digital technologies like e-mail, blog posts or tweets for such engagements may in some cases be an easy option for the lecturer. In other cases, pen and paper are even more comfortable options.

When discussing participation in lectures, there are issues which people often tend to consider the sole professional domain of the lecturers – setting the course aims and marking. However, research into adult education, and indeed university students are adults in this context, has talked about the importance of self-directed learning (Garrison, 1997). This means that it is important to provide students with the opportunity to take control over their learning. Personal experience shows that engaging students in setting the aims of the course or in formulating the grading criteria of the homework or exams works really well in boosting their motivation and supporting the empowerment and general feeling of justice. In the theoretical course, there might be an opportunity to have an "open lecture" for which the topic is chosen by a vote (from a selection offered by the teacher). A methodological course might provide students with an opportunity to choose their own research questions to trial the selected methods, etc. In my personal experience, the fear that students will set themselves lower aims has not yet proved to be true. In all of the cases where I have involved students in setting their own aims or rules for passing the course, their standards and requirements have proven to be higher than I would have chosen.

In the next section I will briefly introduce some ways to engage students in lectures using a variety of techniques appropriate to different phases of the lecture.

3. Beginning of the lecture – set the frames

Mezirow (1997) talks about transformative learning, insisting that, especially in adult education, one of the ways of learning is challenging existing frames of reference through critical reflection. This means that, at the beginning of the lecture, it is good to evoke those frames and remind students about their prior knowledge of the subject field. This may in many cases also mean that the lecturer will have a good opportunity to dispel some 'wrong' notions about the subject field. In the area of media studies, there is a lot of 'common knowledge' which, without critical examination, may seem 'true' about the media. When such 'everyday truths' are then presented at the exam, both students and lecturers will be quite unhappy about the results. Mind mapping is one quick and easy exercise to get to

know these frames of reference beforehand and deal with them in detail during the course/lecture.

It also makes sense to ask people to write down a question or short paragraph about their expectations for the learning, as this can also force people to think about the subject of the lecture and thus prepare the ground for better learning. In many instances, where lecturers have asked students to write down their expectations, it can happen that an average student does not have any, or the expectations are so superficial that they do not support any deeper engagement. This happens more at bachelor level or when the subject field is less familiar to students. In those instances, it may make sense to introduce the topics of the course/lecture and only then let them choose which of the topics they feel would be most relevant or, in their opinion, what might be missing. That provides students with some input and, when possible, the lecturer can be flexible and perhaps let students choose the content of one lecture which they feel would be most relevant to them.

Thus, while one could argue that the beginning of the lecture is a time when participatory activities are least needed – everyone is still fresh and willing to just listen and pay attention - in many cases, it still makes sense to engage students in participatory design of the lecture/course in the early stages, as, in addition to giving a feeling of empowerment, this also supports student learning by evoking existing frames.

4. Middle of the lecture – wake up and smell the coffee

In most cases, lectures last 2 x 45 minutes and it is up to the lecturer to decide whether to schedule a short break. In my personal experience, the temptation to avoid such a break is very great, despite the knowledge that attention begins to wane after 15-20 minutes. However, I do believe that using interactive techniques several times through the 90 minutes will support student learning, even if there is no longer break. One such quick-relief technique when the lecturer notices students fading away is the two-minute reflection pause. This can be used in any size of classroom as, in principle, it is a technique which provides interaction between a single student and the lecture content. For this, students can be asked to think and write down for themselves in two minutes a short summary of what they have learned so far. In most cases, it is not necessary to collect and read these reflections, because this may feel too much like a test and put unnecessary pressure on the group. However, doing so every now

and then might give the lecturer interesting feedback as to how well his/her "content delivery" works.

There are variations of group exercises which can be used to enliven the lecture and support peer learning, and these also work in large classrooms. One way could be to provide students with three to four different short texts, one for each student, and ask them to read and explain their text to the other members of their group. This works nicely with theoretical concepts where there are different authors or different schools providing contradictory explanations for the same phenomenon. Using in-class reading may feel like a waste of time, when the students could read at home and listen to the lecturer in the classroom, but such 'explain-to-your-peer techniques' are highly relevant and support student interaction for the purposes of better learning.

My aim in this short chapter is not to give an overview of all the possible techniques, but rather to prompt the reader to think about possible engagement opportunities. The mid-lecture engagements might include but are not limited to questions and discussions of contradictory issues, the sharing of experiences, pictures or short films to trigger discussions etc. The main aim could be to provide relief from 'the monologue of the talking head' in front of the classroom, but, more relevantly, these interactive exercises should support participant and peer learning and, ideally, also provide the teacher with new insights.

5. Close of the lecture – take away and remember

One might question whether there is any need to use participatory techniques at the end of the lecture, as students will be going off to have a break anyway. But the close of the lecture is a perfect opportunity to ask students to reflect and engage with the content of the meeting. Interactive exercises might include a short quiz on what they have learned, or asking for questions and clarifications. However, lecturers will probably have noticed how those few who dare to ask questions after the 'bell' are shot murderous glances by their peers for delaying their 'escape'. Not all the students will be equally engaged and interested, and thus responding to questions might frustrate the others. One useful technique here is to ask people to write down their questions so that the lecturer can answer them at the beginning of the next class. This helps to tie together two lectures, and asking questions is a very insightful technique in order to get to know what students have thought or learned.

6. Multimedia support for interactive lecture

I would also like to say a few words about multi-media support for interactive lectures as, in many cases, films or sounds can be used to prompt discussions or conduct a practical analysis exercise on media texts. This helps to bring the 'real world' into the classroom and provides a better connection with academic concepts and actual applications. However, media ought to be used carefully, as excerpts from a movie that are too long can be counter-productive and will hinder learning instead of supporting it.

PowerPoint slides have many pros and cons. On the one hand, they support learning by providing visual mementos of where we are in a discussion. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine anything more boring than a lecturer reading slides with their back turned to the class. For interactive lectures, eye contact is crucial and, if turning off the projector is the only way to achieve that, then it is worth doing, especially as classes vary in their ability to listen and it is the role of the lecturer to notice and support students before they get too bored.

For gathering feedback from participatory exercises, black- or white-boards, flipcharts, coloured or white writing paper or post-it notes work extremely well. Paper can be used to gather feedback from large numbers of groups, to keep a written record of what is being said and to provide a way to interact with the content. In the first interactive classes, the lecturer may need to keep an extra supply of pens, as many students rely heavily on computers and have neglected to bring a pen to the class.

7. Best practice vs. good practice – reflexivity as a key to interactive teaching

When considering guidelines of any sort, they are often framed as best practice. And while I can honestly claim that much of what has been said in this chapter is based on my personal experience and many of these things have worked very well, I shy away from claiming that this is in any way a guide to best practice. The notion of 'best practice' implies an ideal type, a single and correct way of doing things. Depending on who is talking, best practice often varies. This is best seen in interdisciplinary contexts, where best practice tends to depend on who is talking, and thus 'best practice' depends on the practitioners.

In this chapter I would prefer to promote 'good enough practice', meaning that I am a realist about the fact that there is always an element of surprise in teaching. More often than not, a good method depends on who is in the class, what the subject is, what the room is like, the time of the day, how the lecturer gets along with his/her class and so on. In short, there are many factors which influence how successful the lecturer is in promoting participation and interaction in the class. Thus, instead of promoting a specific way of doing things, I would certainly recommend being reflexive about one's own teaching practice and using participatory techniques to gather feedback in order to improve the course.

Overall, structured feedback, whether it is institutionally supported or delivered on one's own initiative, always makes sense, and provides the necessary input for self-reflexivity. Participatory techniques e.g. group work with consensus as an aim, can be one way of doing it. Those who participated in the summer school will remember the evaluation workshop where group dynamics were used to suppress single criticisms and a consensus among the group was needed to voice negative or positive comments. This kind of feedback workshop also provides students with relevant insights that the things they have liked about the course might be the least favourite for others, or vice versa. Having used feedback workshops at the end of my courses, I can generally say that the insights gained have so far always been relevant. Often, this has not meant changing the course, but rather being more elaborate about some of the choices made.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has hopefully served as a brief reminder that teaching and students are integral parts of universities. As communication scholars, we can use our theoretical and empirical knowledge to be reflexive about our own teaching practice and thus improve the quality of the education, despite the outside and inside pressures exerted by the marketisation and massification of education.

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