A Lecture From the Lectured

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Image: The Breakfast Club (1985)

Editor's Note: The following post was written by a group of students in a writing course taught by Catherine Prendergast, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

This past fall, The New York Times and Slate published essays by an academic and a former academic on the pros and cons of the lecture. In reflecting on this century-old staple of the college classroom, both Molly Worthen for the Times and Rebecca Schuman for Slate described college students as disengaged, uninspired, and at the mercy of the distractions of our laptops.

Neither essay quoted an actual college student, even though students were imagined as the beneficiaries of the discussion.

So we — 15 students in a course on freelance writing at the University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign, where large lectures are an unavoidable feature of our education — will add our voice to this important conversation. And we think we can be of immense help.

When Molly Worthen asks, for instance, why it is so hard for her to hold our attention for just 90 minutes a day, we are happy to tell her.

Because it's rarely just 90 minutes of our day. At a university like ours, where thousands of students compete to fulfill their general-education requirements, it is lecture after lecture after lecture. For three to four hours of our day, we sit in cavernous rooms — with up to 800 strangers — where the professor doesn't know our name, let alone ask us to speak.

We have learned to adapt. Some of us walk in late and grab a seat at the back so we can surf the Internet while flipping back to lecture slides on our laptops: Maslow's hierarchy of needs, J. Crew 50 percent off, Darwinism, Facebook — just as you feared.

Or maybe we're not surfing the Internet but rather doing work for another class. We're trying to hold down a job to pay for college, and our time is at a premium.

Others of us are the kind of perfect student that Rebecca Schuman tells us is so rare these days. We sit in the front, but get discouraged as our fellow students disappear over the course of the semester. Particularly those of us diagnosed with attention deficit disorders try to sit where we can avoid distractions.

But even sitting up front doesn't help when the professor is on a stage elevated so far above us we feel as though we're watching a live play with only one actor in it. If the lecture is just a monotone recitation of the PowerPoint presentation, or a regurgitation of the textbook, we feel we're not losing anything by not coming to class.

Some of us want to ask questions, but find it intimidating to approach the stage, especially if the professor has a "you should probably just know this by now" attitude. So many of us just stop coming.

We expect to be held accountable, but we would also hold accountable our professors as well. Nothing will guarantee our attendance if we do not have the opportunity to challenge our professors, ask questions of them, and engage with our paying classmates. When we feel as though we won't be missed if we skip class, it makes it easy to do just that.

We don't all agree that the lecture is doomed. A number of us have found professors who have really inspired us with their lectures. They convey their subject with energy, and engage us as people. One gathers students on stage to act out what he is teaching. Another, a climatologist, asks us to send him photos of the day's weather. Professors who ask us questions, make jokes,
bring in their dogs — do anything to humanize themselves — make us feel less like just a body in the room.

We can tell you those professors are too few and far between. Websites like RateMyProfessor have become an indispensable resource for finding them. Professors might not like being reduced to a mere number, but, hey, neither do we.

We will admit that the problem is not that the lecture is inherently a horrendous format. We've had bad small discussion-based classes where no one has done the required reading. We've sat through awkward silences when no one wants to add to the discussion.

But for us, the lecture seems too much the default option for educating a lot of us at the cheapest price.

Instead of debating the lecture, instead of imagining what students are thinking, get to know us. Find out what college is like for us now, rather than what it was like for you years ago. Learn that we respond to your lecture very individually, and that we pick our lectures often for the individuality of the professor rather than the subject. Condemning or celebrating the lecture isn't, in the end, as useful as understanding what we need. So please ask us. Because we've had enough of sitting silently in the dark, listening to all of you talk.

Sincerely,

John Barone, Cassandra Chaplinsky, Taylor Ehnle, John Heaney, Riley Jackson, Zoe Kaler, Rachael Kossy, Benjamin Lane, Thomas Lawrence, Jessica Lee, Sarah Lullo, Kevin McCammack, Daniel Seeder, Carly Smith, and Demetrius Wade — students in Catherine Prendergast's writing course at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

This article relates to...

- students
- classroom
- teaching