Professors Shouldn’t Teach to Younger Versions of Themselves

Too many academics focus on ideal students rather than real ones.

By Rebecca Schuman

Students pack into a crowded lecture hall at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University on Oct. 13, 2014, in Frankfurt, Germany, for a lecture, or, “mental workout.”

Photo by Thomas Lohnes/Getty Images

In last weekend’s New York Times opinion section, UNC-Chapel Hill professor Molly Worthen set the academic internet ablaze with a paean to the unappreciated perfection of the old-fashioned “sage on stage” format, also known as the lecture. “Absorbing a long, complex argument is hard work,” she argued; the work is worthwhile because students ostensibly learn to “to synthesize, organize and react” as they listen. Abandoning the lecture, she argues, capitulates “to the worst features of the customer-service mentality that has seeped into the university from the business world.” Professors should advertise lectures as “an exercise in mindfulness and attention building, a mental workout,” and one that also hones that most important of important skills, note-taking. “Verbatim transcription is never the goal: Students should synthesize as they learn.”

Rebecca Schuman is an education columnist for Slate.

I will grant that nothing about the lecture format as Worthen describes it is inherently bad. But Worthen’s elegy to a format that bores so many students reminds me of a bad habit that too many professors have: building their teaching philosophies around younger versions of themselves, who were often more conscientious, more interested in learning, and more patient than the student staring at his phone in the back of their classrooms.

Here’s an example. Many undergraduates learn about Plato—or, more realistically, they zone out during lectures on Plato. Often, they’re zoning out because their professors have planned that lecture for—speaking of Plato—the “ideal” student, the perfect one, the one who does synthesize as he or she learns.
Sure, students should learn to listen to their betters speak for 50 minutes about something difficult. They also should not email me at 11:30 p.m., informing me that since the Wi-Fi is out in their dorm room, there is “no way” for them to do their homework for the next day. When I was a professor, I had very high expectations of my students—but I also recognized that they came in all varieties, and thus they deserved a variety of instructional approaches, possibly including the lecture, but certainly not restricted to it.

Worthen is certainly correct that absorbing a long, complex argument is hard work, and it was probably work that she herself enjoyed as an undergraduate. It appears that she plans her courses with this experience in mind, and she’s not alone. I saw it in my pedagogy seminar in grad school (the class in which we learned curriculum design and lesson planning). Our assignment was to develop a new German course for imaginary undergrads, and one of my classmates designed one that was punishingly hard. “I could have done it!” she said indignantly. “All I did every night in college was make lists of vocabulary words, over and over again. They should, too!” Maybe they should—but most of them won’t.

Almost all of the beginning academics I know make rookie errors in their first years of teaching, usually involving overly long syllabi they assume the students will read (ha), or overly elaborate assignments they assume the students will do correctly on the first try (double-ha). Then they take to Facebook bemoaning the fact that their classes aren’t working, that none of the students are reading, that they’re teaching to a room of backpacks.

This makes perfect sense, though, because they plan their courses for the front-row kid who has read every word of the assignment (twice!), the kid whose hand flies up after every question. The kid whose notes everyone else would copy before the final, if they didn’t hate his guts. Every class has a handful of these, and they often go on to grad school and the professoriate. What about everybody else?

When I was a professor, I usually assigned both a reasonable amount of reading and a list of detailed questions about that reading. Students were graded on their answers, which we’d spend a lot of the class discussing. I did this because if someone had done that to me back when I was a distinctly mediocre undergrad—me and the majority of my classmates—we would have learned to read better and smarter and eventually faster. Yes, an ideal student is already a good reader or possesses the desire to become one. But real students are often too busy (working 40 hours a week, taking care of family members, or even just being college students) to take this kind of initiative. Worthen claims that before students can appreciate a lecture, they have to be taught how to listen. But before that, in many cases, they have to be taught how to read.

The American professoriate shouldn’t gear their courses exclusively to students who are so bright and motivated they could learn the material on their own. They should also include components designed for the average, real, very-much-not-ideal student they will actually meet.

Worthen is proud that her fealty to the lecture is “deeply unfashionable,” aligning herself with a tradition of humanists “beating back calls to update our methods, to follow the lead of the sciences, for a very long time.” But she and other Platonist professors are conflating an eagerness to reach as many students as possible (even if that involves teaching in multiple formats) with capitulating to the customer-service mentality. This is a false equivalence, and in my experience it’s also inaccurate.

Indeed, the lecture format is often actually giving “customers” what they want. I’ve met plenty of students who are only too happy to sit there counting minutes while the professor’s uninterrupted soliloquy fades to Peanuts-esque trombone sounds. (It’s fine; they printed out the PowerPoint anyway.) It’s actually often the seminar format that students don’t want, because it forces them to be present in the classroom. In 75 minutes loaded with the “learner-centered” activities that Worthen dismisses as callow consumerism, the class still works through that “long, complex argument,” but they do it together, with a measure of involvement, investment, and sometimes even retention (the kind not even the most meticulous notes can provide).

Breaking up lectures with more involved instructional methods isn’t necessarily giving students what they want. But sometimes, it is giving students what they need. If only the Platonists of academia could realize this—although that would involve coming out from behind the lectern, and listening to what their students have to say.
Is the Oregon Standoff Evidence of a Racial Double Standard?

Not really. And we are in danger of drawing the wrong lessons from the fact that these armed militiamen are white.

Jamelle Bouie

Why Saudi Arabia and Iran May Be Seeking a New Crisis

Trump's First Political Ad Is Pure Trump

What If Republican Voters Don't Value Seriousness Anymore?

There Have Been 30,000 Reported Shootings in 2015. How Many Happened In Your Neighborhood?

Think You're Smarter Than the Host of the Gist? Find Out With This Special Slate News Quiz.

Marco Rubio Doesn't Understand What It Takes to Win the White House

Jeb Bush Is Burning Through Money to Destroy Other GOP Establishment Candidates

BUSINESS

MONEYBOX
Welcome Back to the Office. China’s Stock Market Crashed Again.

Mark Zuckerberg Wants to Make an A.I. Butler Like the One in Iron Man

The Best, Worst, and Weirdest Career Advice This Exec Has Ever Gotten

Uber Might Want to Be Your Next Travel Agent

Why the Government Just Banned Those Plastic Microbeads in Your Face Wash

Elizabeth Warren Is Shaping the Democratic Primary Without Even Running


The Piracy Group That Leaked The Hateful Eight Suddenly Falls Silent
What Are Mistakes That First-Time Entrepreneurs Make?

Quora Contributor

Help! My Boyfriend Is a Great Guy Who Uses Anti-Gay Slurs Only When Playing Video Games.

Lesbians Touch Penis for the First Time—Entirely Missing the Point of Lesbianism

Help! Should My Daughter’s Girlfriend Stay With Us if Her Parents Don’t Know She’s Gay?

Chicago Is Massively Expanding Access to Coding Classes in Public Schools. That’s Good, Right?

Stunning Modernist Covers of 1930s Fortune Magazine Will Give You a Bad Case of Print Nostalgia

Hess Triangle: The Smallest Piece of Property in New York City History

Should a Greek Island Reconstruct One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World?

DOUBLE X

FAMILY
Like Tinder, but for Babysitters
Why finding a caregiver online is a lot like Internet dating.
Tamar Hirsh Ariohn

Megyn Kelly Thinks She’s the Next Oprah Winfrey, Here’s Why She’s Not,

For Fundraising, Education, and Economic Justice, Girl Scout Cookie Sales Need a Shake-Up

The Cosby Case Raises Important Questions on How States Define Sexual Assault

Legal Action Against Bill Cosby Is Still Important, Even With His Career in Shambles

Gina Rodriguez’s Tribute to Rita Moreno Reveals Struggles Actresses of Color Share

It’s Not Bill Clinton’s Old Affairs That Will Hurt Hillary, It’s the Assault Allegations.

What We Can Learn From That Study About Campus Rape on Game Days
Help! I Can't Get Enough Dear Prudence.
Prudie answers more of your questions, only for Slate Plus members.

Mallory Ortberg

Slate Plus Members Sent Me to Umpire School

Sitaars, Hillary Hate, and Rob Ford's Clone: What Dahlia Lithwick's Reading This Week

You're Doing It Wrong if You Missed These Stories in 2015

How Long Does It Take to Sell a House? This Realtor Explains the Process.
Inside the Making of Serial Season 2

Carl Swanson

What the Decline of New Girl Reveals About How Hard It Is for Sitcom Characters to Evolve

China Miéville and the Power of Imprecision

How a Franchise Movie Like Creed Ends Up Among the Best of the Year

The Isolated Vocals for “We Are the Champions” Are Crazy Good

Watch Taran Killam Sing 12 Facts About Alexander Hamilton That Aren’t in Hamilton. (Five Are True.)

Downton Abbey’s Final Season Is Full of Clichéd Characters and Bad Writing. Also, It’s Great.

TECHNOLOGY

FUTURE TENSE
Good News: No One Is Using That White–People Dating Site

Jacob Brogan

Twitter Banished Politwoops. Now It's Finally Back.

GM and Lyft Want to Build Driverless Taxis. They’ll Have to Get in Line.

Who Really Controls What You See in Your Facebook Feed—and Why They Keep Changing It

Wow, There Were Just So Many Hacks in 2015

Future Tense Newsletter: Happy Next Year

The Predictions We Make Can Change How the Future Unfolds

HEALTH & SCIENCE

BAD ASTRONOMY
When Worlds Elide

Phil Plait

The World Can Eliminate Malaria, but It's Running out of Time

Why Don't People Eat Turtle Soup Anymore? It's Not a Mysterious Mystery.

The Best Upcoming Astronomical Events of 2016

Will the Asteroid Apophis Hit Earth in 2036? No. Seriously, No.

The Best Meteor Shower You've Never Heard of Peaks This Week

Today the Earth Is Closer to the Sun Than It Will Be All Year

SPORTS

SPORTS NUT
Alabama’s Joyless Champion

Nick Saban might be the greatest college coach of all time. He’s definitely the grimmest.

Michael Weinreb

Why Dabo Swinney’s Christianity Is the Perfect Marketing Tool for Clemson Football

It’s Silly Season for Bowl Games, but None Could Be Sillier Than the Glasnost Bowl

The Steph Curry Spiciness Index: Does This Step-Back Bomb Crack His Top-Five Plays?

Concussion Gets Basic Facts Wrong and Feeds Myths About the NFL and Head Trauma

The Steph Curry Spiciness Index: Does This Behind-the-Back Magic Crack His Top-Five Plays?

How Abby Wambach Shaped a Generation of Female Athletes