

THE FIRST LECTURE

Jason Scott Earl—Department of Business Management

A lot of attention has been given lately to the idea of “the last lecture,” where a professor is asked to consider his demise and impart his great wisdom to the world. In his lecture and book of the same title, Randy Pausch allows an individual to ask himself a key question: “If you had to vanish tomorrow, what would you want to leave as your legacy today?”¹ I find the idea very inspiring, even praiseworthy; however, I have no great teaching career to look back upon, let alone any great wisdom of my own to share with the world. In fact, as a new faculty member at BYU–Idaho, I am encouraged to lecture less and instead facilitate learning as my students prepare, teach one another, and ponder and prove. And as we all know, it is the spirit who is the great teacher of truth.

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The idea of a “first lecture” or “first case study” was driven home when I was asked to meet with a small teaching group in April 2008 to prepare for a new course (Entrepreneurial Management) to be taught in our department. The new course came with great expectation, as it was based on 34 Harvard case studies dealing with new ventures. The goal of the course is to help students understand that entrepreneurship is a way of managing a company, not a type of company. During the course we were to study everything from small startup companies to nonprofit organizations to billion-dollar corporations which have the opportunity to steer their companies into new directions.

THE TEACHING GROUP

As our teaching group formed, we quickly decided to create two sections of the course and that two faculty members would co-teach each section in order to get a feel for the course and avoid carrying the entire load of casework. Clark Gilbert was chosen by our department chair to lead our teaching group, and we outlined a schedule to review a case each week and prepare for the experience of teaching the same material in the same context as we learned together.

As I wrapped my mind around this amazing opportunity, I was struck by two overpowering thoughts: 1) I had never taught a case study in my life, and 2) I was going to be teaching these unfamiliar cases with my department chair in my class every day of the semester. An acute sense of dread fell upon me, and I was instantly reminded of my “First Lecture” at BYU–Idaho (one year earlier) as part of the interview process for new faculty members, which did not go well.

THE FIRST LECTURE

It was a cold day in March of 2007 as I made my way across campus to teach my first lecture. I was then working in California as the president of a startup which was about to be sold to a group of venture capitalists. I had always imagined coming back to Ricks College to teach someday, but I never thought the opportunity would come so soon. The last time I had been in the Smith Building was 1992, and now, 15 years later, I was going to teach a class in the Integrated Business Core (IBC) on one of my favorite subjects: the valuation of companies. I reminded myself that I knew the material, I had lived the life of an engineer and a financial analyst, and now I could dazzle these young business students with my vast knowledge and experience. How wrong I was. As I walked into the room of approximately 70 business students with laptop computers poised and almost the entire department faculty at the back of the room, I suddenly realized that I was prepared to lecture, but I was not ready to teach. At the end of the 90 minute ordeal, the department chair pulled me into his office and said with a broad smile on his face, “So, how do you think you did?” All I could think to say was, “not very well.” The disparity between my perceived and actual ability to teach was crystal clear to me and everyone else in that classroom. After flying back to California, I received a call from the dean of the college who said, “You are young, you are inexperienced, and you need to learn how to teach. A few people seemed to like you, but you probably won’t get the job.” I said that I understood and thanked him for his time. I felt crushed. When I received another call a few weeks later, the response was a little different, “A few things have changed in the department and you have been chosen as one of the candidates to come here and teach. You are lacking in many areas, but if you have the desire to learn as you teach, we are extending the invitation.”

What a lesson to be learned about lecturing and teaching! To understand that it is not the teacher’s individual preparation or quality of lecture which results in great learning experiences, but the preparation of the students and their desire to discover truth for themselves. In her conference address “The Ordinary Classroom,” Sister Virginia H. Pearce summarized the ultimate goal in teaching when she said:

A teacher’s goal is greater than just delivering a lecture about truth. It is to invite the Spirit and use techniques which will enhance the possibility that the learner will discover the truth for herself and then be motivated to apply it. Although some seem to be born teachers, teaching skills can successfully be learned. Where can you go as a teacher to enhance your skills? Could you watch and learn from others? Perhaps approach an admired teacher, asking him to observe and offer suggestions? ...We don’t have to struggle alone in this

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Church. There is help everywhere. We can prayerfully and courageously seek to learn and practice new techniques.²

Although Sister Pearce gave this talk more than twelve years ago, I find many elements of the Learning Model in her counsel. First, we should invite the Spirit; second, we should use techniques which allow the students to discover truths for themselves; third, the students should be motivated to apply what they have learned (i.e., through teaching one another); and fourth, we can learn and practice new techniques to increase our effectiveness as teachers.

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LECTURE VS. TEACH ONE ANOTHER

As I have considered the tradeoff between my level of preparation to teach and the individual preparation of my students to teach one another, I imagine a graph or figure, similar to the one below:

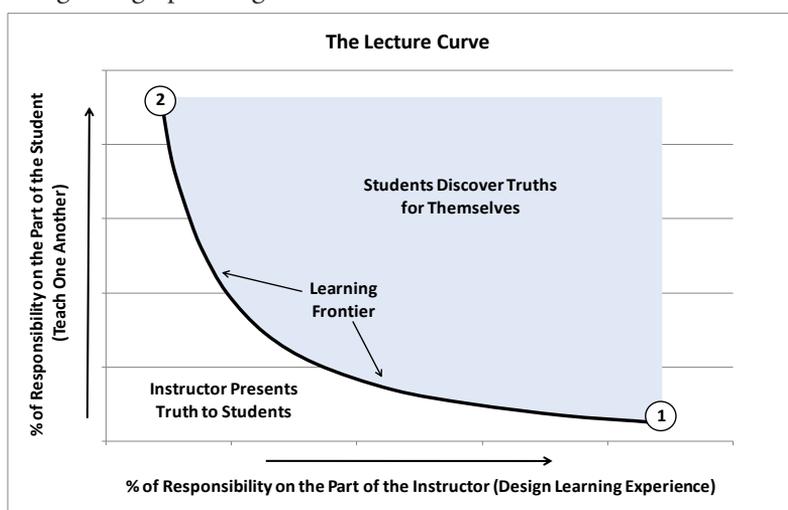


Figure 1.1 Lecture vs. "Teach One Another"

On the x-axis we have a certain percentage of responsibility placed on the instructor in the form of content mastery and curricular design, and on the y-axis, we have a certain percentage of responsibility placed on student preparation in the form of teaching one another. Based on these criteria which appear diametrically opposed, we find a "Learning Frontier" or curve which defines the critical path between instructors presenting truth and students discovering truth for themselves. For example, if I spend all of my time as an instructor lecturing my students and reviewing "perfect" PowerPoint slides where each truth is outlined in clear and distinct bullets, there is little opportunity for my students to teach one another, let alone discover new truths for themselves. On the figure, this is represented as Point 1 (Figure 1.1) in the lower right

hand corner. However, if I place all the emphasis in the class on my students with the responsibility to teach each other and spend little time in designing the learning experience for them, then I am left with “students swapping ignorance”³ as represented at Point 2 (Figure 1.1) on the figure. At this extreme we find students limited in their ability to find and discover new truths and often frustrated with the course and the instructor. This begs several questions, 1) How do we get off this indifference curve between the student’s responsibility and the instructor’s responsibility? 2) What are some of the techniques which allow us to push this Learning Frontier into the right-upper quadrant? and 3) How do we allow students to discover new truths in a contained and quantifiable way? Enter the Teaching Group.

BACK TO THE TEACHING GROUP

One of the first things we learned in our little teaching group was that inside the “case method” is intellectual property on how to teach, which does not appear to be teaching at all. The key ingredient to this teaching technique is not the case, nor is it the class discussion which typically grows out of the case. The true proprietary asset is the actual group of instructors who meet each week to review the case, discuss the lesson plan, and debrief on what is working or not working in the class discussions. As these instructors review each other’s notes and refine their lesson plans, a natural pattern for how to teach each case evolves over time. As each lesson plan is aligned with certain learning outcomes, students are polled on their ability to find and identify these truths which are buried in each case. Over time, a particular order of cases is chosen, allowing the students to build upon the key principles of entrepreneurial management which can be mined out of each case. The net effect is an increase in the instructor’s level of preparation to present the case and a tremendous increase in the students’ ability to teach one another through individual preparation as well as student group meetings, where they can discuss each case before class. The figure below shows how this technique not only moves the Learning Frontier towards the upper-right quadrant but actually inverts the curve or the relationship between the instructor’s and the student’s shared responsibility.

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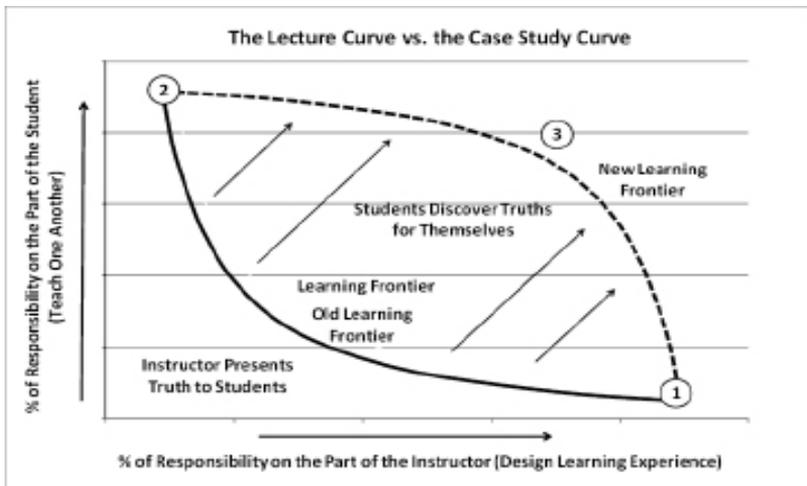


Figure 2.1 Lecture Curve vs. Case Study Curve

This new figure helps to show that as we begin at Point 1 (Figure 2.1) and push the amount of responsibility for preparation and learning to the students without deepening the responsibility of the instructor to design the learning experience, we end up on the old “Learning Frontier” and back at Point 2 (Figure 2.1). However, through the combined efforts of the instructor and the student, as well as carefully designed learning experiences (i.e., case studies, simulations, group projects), we enter a new “Learning Frontier” where students are able to discover truths for themselves at Point 3 (Figure 2.1).

Although no patent can be written on this particular technique or teaching process (although I’m sure Harvard University has tried to do so), the real intellectual property of this teaching technique resides in the mind of each instructor. This intangible asset grows and develops with each meeting of the teaching group. The collective knowledge of this teaching group is then transferred to the students through a designed learning experience where students can teach each other in their own respective groups. The figure above attempts to show how the Learning Frontier is pushed out to a new level of learning and how these same students now have the ability to discover new truths for themselves and share what they have learned during class discussion.

As I listened to Clark Gilbert describe this process during our first few meetings in the teaching group, I remember feeling a headache begin to build and thinking to myself, “What on earth is this guy talking about?” I read each of the Harvard cases over the summer break and then I really began to worry. We were talking about how to break up each case, which “pasture” to move to during the class discussion, and how long to wait before asking certain key questions. In the middle of our preparations, we decided to scrap 14 of the 34 cases and implement the “ponder and prove” step of the Learning Model by allowing each Friday of the week

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to become a day for the students to discuss in their own student groups what they had learned and also take a short quiz in I-Learn. Incidentally, we also structured the course so that the students received a score for their individual quiz at the end of each week as well as a score based on their group's average quiz performance.

As the fall semester drew nigh, our group finalized the first few lesson plans and I began to feel a little better about the material. I had spent time analyzing each case, and based on our teaching group meetings, I knew the learning outcomes and where the real “gems” were buried. I had also become familiar with the “pastures” which are particular areas of each case where we allow our students to graze on the case facts and and share their own insights and discoveries with the class. I also learned how to couch key questions that would allow us to move from one pasture to another within the case. Up until this time, I had always assumed that teaching a case was much easier than giving a lecture. After all, the student is required to read, study, and discuss the information with their own learning groups prior to coming to class. I had often wondered what motivated a student to dive deep into the material and be properly prepared. Now I understood—lots of preparation on the part of the instructor (not to lecture, but to design a learning experience) and lots and lots of carefully structured “polls” and “cold calls.”

During that summer, our department secretary, Amy Staiger, spent time setting up polls, study questions, and quiz questions for each case in I-Learn. Before students walked into the classroom, they were each required to log into I-Learn and answer two or three poll questions. They were also given four or five study questions to thoughtfully consider in preparation for the class discussion. Instructors then collected and analyzed the poll results for trends before class began. Over time, this information proved invaluable when it came to reading the minds of students. As an instructor, I knew what decision the majority of the class was leaning towards, and I knew who to “cold call” in order to get an entirely different opinion which would sway the thinking of the class. In brief, after reading the case, analyzing the learning outcomes, meeting with my teaching group and structuring all of the preparation and pondering steps in I-Learn, I was finally ready—not to lecture, but to teach.

Up until this time, I had always assumed that teaching a case was much easier than giving a lecture.

THE FIRST CASE STUDY

As we began class with a prayer that bright September day with the first case (R&R), I remember looking into the eyes of my students. I did not yet know them each by name, but I knew what the majority of them were thinking based on the poll questions they had answered the night before: This was just another story about a crazy entrepreneur who

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gambled a lot of money, got lucky, and made even more money. I asked my first cold call question: “Brad, please summarize the case and tell us how much capital was at risk.” I listened. I waited. I asked a follow-up question and waited again. Four hands shot into the air. I nodded at Dana in the back of the room and asked her what she thought. When Dana finished her comments with some compelling insight, five more hands went up. This was getting exciting and I had not mentioned one word about my knowledge or experience, let alone what I thought about the case. In the next 45 minutes, we covered four more pastures and every student in the class had an opportunity to make a comment or share some insight about the case. As we came to a close, I asked Brad, “Please summarize the case and tell us how much capital was at risk.” The answer was very different this time, and students in the room nodded their head in agreement. We finished the class with these words on the white board: “Entrepreneurs don’t *take* risk, they *manage* risk.”³ The protagonist was no longer a crazy, gambling entrepreneur; he was a smart manager who risked very little. We returned to his story and this particular case again and again throughout the rest of the semester.

As it turned out, this first case study was a simple class: No sensational stories; no Rhodes Scholar class members; just students who came prepared to participate. Nor was there an extraordinarily gifted teacher with amazing personal stories and PowerPoints to share; just one who used techniques which allow students to discover truth for themselves. As I returned to my teaching group and shared what happened, I found excitement among the faculty. I was actually learning from my students and the words of 3 Nephi 26 came to mind when Christ taught the Nephites:

And he did expound all things, even from the beginning until the time that he should come in his glory—yea, even all things which should come upon the face of the earth.⁴

Certainly, the Master Teacher knew what to teach and how to teach, but a little further into that same chapter we read:

And it came to pass that he did teach and minister unto the children of the multitude of whom hath been spoken, and he did loose their tongues, and they did speak unto their fathers great and marvelous things, even greater than he had revealed unto the people; and he loosed their tongues that they could utter.⁵

I believe that most of our learning falls into one of two categories. On the one hand, we hear or read some ideas and they correlate with what we already believe, so we tuck them away as bits of additional information. On the other hand, we may read or hear something with which we do not agree, so we don’t really try to understand it or we are

just not that interested and toss it to the side. However, there is a third type of learning which so deeply resonates with what we truly believe, that to hear it is to be jolted with a shockwave of recognition. It is as if we had heard it all before, but now we hear it in a new tongue. I believe that when we take the time to learn new teaching techniques and walk into our classes expecting to be taught by the Spirit and by our students, we can experience this third type of teaching.

As I recall the impact of some of my greatest teachers (many of them from my Ricks College days)—they were rarely flashy or impressive. Often they were quiet, humble and simply asked me very direct questions. Always, they allowed me to participate and attempt to bridge the gap between theory and application. As we work in teaching groups to learn from one another at the faculty level, I believe we will discover new teaching techniques and ways to help our students find truth for themselves and most importantly, be motivated to apply it in their lives. ☪

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NOTES

- 1 Randy Pausch, “The Last Lecture” *Hyperion*, April 2008.
- 2 Virginia H. Pearce, “The Ordinary Classroom—a Powerful Place for Steady and Continued Growth,” *Ensign* (November 1996), 11.
- 3 Broadhead, Fenton, and Clark Gilbert. Brigham Young University–Idaho, “Top Ten Learning Model Misconceptions,” *Inspired Learning & Teaching*, <http://web.byui.edu/learningandteaching/post2008/08/Top-Ten-Learning-Model-Misconceptions.aspx> (accessed on 17 February 2009).
- 4 Howard H. Stevenson, “R&R,” Harvard Business School, 9-386-019.
- 5 3 Nephi 26:3.
- 6 3 Nephi 26:14.