

Teaching Excellence at Yale

Lecturing elegantly and effectively requires a deft balance between raising intellectual stakes for students and speaking in everyday language.

Steven Smith, Alfred Cowles

Professor of Political Science (pictured at right), designs his lectures to include four effective components: Each lecture conveys a point. It should be conveyed with a sense of humor. It is framed with a point of view, and lastly, it needs to pass the Bubbe test. “If you can’t convey your ideas in language that your grandmother could understand,” he says, “... then you need to rewrite.” The best lectures, of course, proceed from a deep immersion in the field. Even when teaching beginners, professors work to train students in expert forms of thinking and writing.

“Lecturing is intimately connected to my research topics,” Smith says, though it is not enough just to present surface generalizations about the material. Smith always has students engage directly with the same primary sources he writes about. Yet lecturers must also remember that students often come with little previous knowledge and—sometimes—little initial interest. Engaging such students requires him to come up with creative ways to convey ideas.

Even when students are highly interested in the subject matter, Smith



says without careful attention to crafting each lecture’s focus, they can leave students wondering what they have just listened to. In any lecture, he tries to focus on the few – often very few – things that are absolutely important and that he wants students to take away.

It is imperative to avoid getting too deep into the academic weeds on any topic, and it is challenging, Smith adds, to convey complicated ideas without using jargon. Still, he says, “students should get a sense that to be a scholar or teacher does not require you to be some ashen-faced book worm but is an activity that one can approach with a certain humor, irony, and even mischief.”

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An article exploring the role of the lecture in teaching:

A History professor at UNC Chapel Hill defends the use of lecturing as an essential component of Humanities teaching and learning in an article published by the New York Times: "Lecture Me. Really." by Molly Worthen

Read the article online:

https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/opinion/sunday/lecture-me-really.html?_r=0

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