

## Making History More Visual: A Critical Look at Traditional Lectures

### Get clear about why I'm doing this

Lectures have ultimately been a major aspect in my mentor's Western Civilization class; I have noticed this since I was placed at Charlotte High School in August. Traditional lectures—where students listen as their teacher conveys the information in the front of the room—are not necessarily a negative element in education. In fact, I can hardly imagine a completely lecture-free high school social studies curriculum. Lectures also give teachers the ability to present a great deal of information in a short amount of time. Of course, there are instances when this is essential in order to get material covered in a unit.

But Carol Weinstein points out that when lectures are used, “So often the teacher talks and moves, while students sit passively and listen” (188). Thus, it becomes questionable how much is actually being absorbed by students—especially whether they are learning for the long or short term. When lectures are not indispensable, should they always be used? Without getting rid of lectures, is there any way to adjust my mentor's current style and make it my own? Is it possible to relate the lecture format with students and/or their individual learning styles? These are the questions I considered as I started to modify my mentor's existing curriculum.

I found it relatively unproblematic to begin my internship with teacher-centered and highly lecture-based curriculum. As far as group work, discussions, and any student-centered lessons were concerned, I was anxious of how any of that might turn out. There was a vast difference between my concept of a highly effective history lesson and what I felt I could actually implement. So, I stayed where I felt comfortable—venturing only slightly. Nevertheless,

for the benefit of my students and my own professional practice, my objective throughout the course of this semester has been to bring the two together.

In the end, I am not nearly as good at lecturing as my mentor anyway—not in my wildest dreams. Kaiser is extremely animate—using voices, making funny sound effects, and moving excitedly around the room. He has a wealth of knowledge and personal stories to draw from. He knows what works and what does not since he has been a teacher for nearly 13 years. I have none of that in my arsenal.

Kaiser's usual lessons (roughly three to four days out of a week) are lecture with very few visuals. During lecture, he might write an important word, term, or name on the board to give it emphasis. Students do not see actual images—it is left to the students' imaginations. Instead of showing a geographic map, Kaiser draws a make-shift map on the board. His drawings are often humorous. If students are shown visuals, they are displayed post-lecture. For example, he might assign students to color a map of the region already discussed.

Interest in the current lecture does not mean that the students are learning for the long term. Even though Kaiser seems to be effective at keeping students' attention by his animate lecture style, some students might not be learning the material without charts, diagrams, and/or pictures—such as the visual learners, and possibly special needs students, in the classroom. According to Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, "...students with special needs are students who are different enough from their classmates that they require specially adapted instructional materials and practices to help them maximize their cognitive and social development" (71). Ormrod later gives a suggestion on how to do just that when she says, "Students learn from both live and symbolic methods. We should provide numerous opportunities for students to observe us and others demonstrating important skills" (156). Which leads me to question whether Kaiser's

students are entertained or learning each day? Must students be entertained in order for them to learn?

Kaiser's entertaining lectures also produce a certain obstacle for me in his classroom because I am not Kaiser and I do not give lectures exactly the same. If students have the two of us to compare in that department (as a veteran teacher and an intern), I am afraid I end up lacking. While I have learned plenty of valuable tactics from him—there are things I cannot reproduce—such as his voices and accents for historical “characters” and the ability to draw funny images on the board. I tried to be like Kaiser at first, but was not being true to my own personality. After careful observation, I began to wonder if his students might not benefit from visual aids.

Just as students vary in their personalities, looks, and preferences, they also differ in the way they learn. Lectures do not reach every student, every time. As indicated by Thomas Good, of, *Looking in Classrooms*, “Lectures imply the usually incorrect assumption that all students need the same information...Lectures only convey information; they do not develop skills or dispositions” (381). In fact, traditional lectures also involve teaching all different kinds of students in an identical way. Even though Kaiser's lectures are inherently entertaining, they are set up to teach all 30 students exactly the same.

Based on the fact that I have 30 individuals in my class with varying learning styles, and that my ability as an effective teacher will increase with multiple approaches, I have decided to consider ways I might more adequately reach students. Because history—especially ancient history—can appear “so long ago” without much humanity to remember, visuals may help to bring in the startling humanity of history when students can literally see a bust of someone we are talking about, a letter s/he wrote, a map of where they lived, or an image of the items they

created/invented. Allowing the class to move in the student-centered direction (such as instituting more group work) might also give students a higher stake in their learning process. In other words, by initiating "...cooperative learning, students help one another accomplish assigned tasks but are also individually accountable for achieving instructional objectives" (Ormrod, 2006).

### **Describe recent events**

Kaiser teaching Western Civilization:

- Day 1:

Kaiser greets students coming into the room, taking attendance as they make their way to their seats. Students are talking to one another during this process.

Once the attendance has been entered into the computer, Kaiser makes his way to the front of the room. Most students quiet down; those that remain talking are soon silenced as they look to see Kaiser standing up front. He starts out by going over the "agenda." Kaiser tells students the outline for the day's activities and what he hopes to accomplish and what will be expected of them as a result.

He then pulls up his stool to the podium and starts to lecture about the chapter section (typically one day's lecture is equivalent to one chapter section). During his lecture, Kaiser fluctuates between sitting, standing, and making leg and arm gestures as he speaks. When someone he is referring to in history "speaks," Kaiser changes his voice and accent. Many students respond with laughter. After 20 minutes, two students begin talking to one another in low voices. Kaiser does not respond until 2 minutes later—with the students still talking—until he mentions one of their names in the middle of a sentence. Both students look at him and are quiet.

30 minutes later, one student puts his head down on the desk. Most students are facing forward, looking in Kaiser's general direction. The previous two students begin whispering to each other again. After a total of about 40 minutes have passed, he gives students a five minute bathroom break.

Students come back in and sit down, talking to one another. Kaiser writes a few words on the board as he is speaking—most students continue to watch him and laugh. None of the students write anything down; they are facing forward, looking at Kaiser. After a while,

several groups of two or more students are speaking quickly back and forth. Kaiser inserts a couple names into the lecture briefly and those students look up at him.

Kaiser finishes his lecture. Several students stretch while two pick their heads up from their desks. He instructs students to read the chapter section and passes out the study guide. Students pull out their books and start working on answering the questions on the study guide. Three students do not pull out books and talk to the person next to them. Kaiser sits at his desk and faces the computer.

When the bell rings, students leave and he says goodbye to them.

- Day 2:

Kaiser again greets students coming into the room, taking attendance as they make their way to their seats. Students are talking to one another during this process.

Once the attendance has been entered into the computer, Kaiser makes his way to the front of the room. Most students quiet down; those that remain talking are soon silenced as they look to see Kaiser standing up front. Going over the “agenda” for the day, he tells students what he hopes to accomplish and what will be expected of them as a result.

Students are asked to take out their study guides from Day 1 and those that have not finished, or were absent the day before, are asked to step into the hall. Kaiser smiles when no one gets up to leave. He congratulates the class as a whole for doing their work. Students switch papers with someone next to them; during this, students are talking back and forth. Once Kaiser begins speaking, the students stop talking and he goes over the correct answers. Students correct their peers’ study guides, calling out answers when asked. If students have any questions, they raise their hands for clarification and Kaiser answers. Papers are returned to their owners with a grade and then are turned into the basket for official credit.

Kaiser pulls his stool up to the podium and begins to lecture about the next chapter and section. Again, he fluctuates between sitting, standing, and making leg and arm gestures. Students face Kaiser’s general direction. After 30 minutes, several students begin talking to one another; two students converse briefly while two others remain talking. One student puts his head down on his desk. Kaiser puts one of the talking student’s names in a sentence and the talking students look at him. Kaiser writes a couple words on the board and students laugh—no one writes anything down.

Kaiser stops lecture and allows students a 3 minute bathroom break. As students reenter the room, they are talking and find their seats. Kaiser puts in a video and tells his class to write down the “10 most important things” they find in the 25 minute clip. During the video, students write on their papers. One student puts her head down. There is intermittent whispering among several students during the movie clip.

After the video, Kaiser passes out a map of the region being studied and gives students the remainder of the block to accurately color and label it according to their textbooks. Typically, there is not one particular map that students must use from the text to recreate their maps—they must gather the information from several maps throughout the chapter section.

Most students pull out their books and colored pencils and begin working on the assignment. Several students talk to the person next to them. Kaiser sits down at his desk and faces the computer. When the bell rings, he tells the students goodbye.

- Day 3:

Kaiser says “hello” to students coming into the room, taking attendance as they make their way to their seats. Students are talking to one another during this process.

Once the attendance has been entered into the computer, Kaiser makes his way to the front of the room. Most students quiet down; those that remain talking are soon silenced as they look to see Kaiser standing up front. Kaiser starts out by going over the “agenda.” He tells students the outline for the day’s activities and what he hopes to accomplish and what will be expected of them as a result.

Kaiser asks that all maps are turned into the basket; there is no further discussion about the assignment. Students get up and put their maps into the basket quickly, talking to each other sporadically.

Kaiser pulls his stool up to the podium and begins to lecture about the next chapter and section. Again, he fluctuates between sitting, standing, and making leg and arm gestures. Students face Kaiser’s general direction and laugh.

After about 15 minutes, Kaiser passes out a sheet for students to fill out. The class is divided in half with part of them being labeled “Spartans” and the other half labeled “Athenians.” Several students smile and call out which nationality they would rather be. Most students begin talking amongst themselves. Roughly 10 minutes later, Kaiser asks students to pair up and share their writings with a partner. Students slowly get up and look around the room at their peers. After all students have found a partner, they begin conversing between pairs. During this group session, Kaiser is at his desk, getting up to answer questions when students raise their hands or call out questions. After five minutes, pairs of students begin talking with other pairs of students. Seven minutes later, students who have finished their group work begin returning to their seats.

Kaiser makes his way to the front of the room and students slowly stop talking. He continues and finishes the lecture where he left off before the small assignment. Three students lean back in their seats and two put their heads down. One student that has his head down is still looking in Kaiser’s general direction. As Kaiser finishes his lecture, he passes out the study guide for the chapter section. Students begin taking their textbooks

out of their bags and start flipping to the section. Kaiser instructs students to use the remainder of the block to work on their study guides, “otherwise, it is homework for tomorrow.”

Only one student does not take out his textbook and sits silently. Kaiser sits at his desk and faces the computer. When the bell rings, he tells the students goodbye.

**Interpret: Construct and compare options for thought**

While looking over the descriptive sample of three of Kaiser’s lessons, there are a few reoccurring instances of student behavior that I would like to understand. For example, why are students talking during lecture? Also, why are students putting their heads down or not watching what the teacher is doing? Is this behavior indicative of a short coming of the lecture format or of something else entirely? I do not believe that this is a personal issue. Since taking over the Western Civilization class, and attempting to imitate and implement Kaiser’s described structure, I got the same results. There were constantly students putting their heads down or engaging in side discussions, not the lesson.

It would be a disservice to the students in the classroom to rush to conclusions about classroom behavior. In fact Ormrod states, “Teachers often draw conclusions about their students early in the school year. These conclusions are sometimes reasonable and warranted, but at other times they are not. Furthermore, teachers make attributions for students’ success and failures (e.g. they might chalk up students’ classroom performance and behavior to intelligence, effort, or some other factor), and such attributions influence their expectations for students’ future success” (186). In other words, teachers need to be careful and avoid quick and lasting deductions about students, their behavior, and/or abilities based on assumptions. Taking a critical look at Kaiser’s, and especially my own, practice in the classroom in regards to lecture will also

help me as a professional educator. As Ormrod puts it: “Effective teachers engage in considerable advance planning, and they continually evaluate and modify their plans as the school year progresses” (205). The key in what she says is “as the year progresses”—or not putting it off for the next time around. It is important as an “effective teacher” to constantly keep a critical eye on the status quo.

Thus, in order to make a sound decision on how best to tackle the issues of student behavior, and to make the educational experience better for my students as well as my own professional practice, I formed the following hypotheses:

In reference to students talking:

1. Students might be talking to others about the lecture, which actually could enrich other students’ experiences. The students in the room may have something important to add but do not consider it crucial enough to mention out loud. Thus, they might simply make comments to someone within earshot of them. If this is the case, it is not an offense worth correcting in the classroom community. Students might also be lost in the information and need clarification from others. Either way, the talking may be a positive asset to the students involved.

It is entirely possible that this is a plausible explanation to the small talk amongst students during lecture. Not all talking is inherently a negative element to the learning atmosphere. If students are lost or have something important to add, this helps to create a learning community and might actually enrich the lecture experience. What leads me to this conclusion is that when most students talk, they generally turn to the person next to them—they are not communicating across the room in a disruptive manner. After reviewing the description of events, it is apparent that students typically talk for extremely short periods of time. For example, on day 2, two students conversed but it was very brief. If the talking is carried to an unacceptable length, such as the other two students on day 2, a word from Kaiser (and later myself) tends to stop the interaction. As Weinstein points out, “...cooperative learning allows students to take an active role in their own learning...” (222). Asking a peer for clarification on an issue or adding to a topic could easily be seen as “cooperative learning” and in such a case, students making small talk in class could simply be taking initiative in their own education experience.

2. Students might be talking about unrelated issues—either from boredom or for social interaction. While students do not appear to be holding conversations across the room, some tend to speak for a lengthy amount of time to the person next to them, which could



cause a distraction for others. Charlotte has block scheduling so students tend to sit for roughly 85-90 minutes at a time. Adding the fact that 30 peers are in the room, this all could produce a social and/or easily distractible situation.

According to Good, “Lectures often exceed students’ attention spans, so that they begin to ‘tune out’” (381). An indication of this, taken from day 1, is when two students talk for about two minutes until they are quieted by Kaiser. After a period of time, the same two students began talking again; they may have “tuned out” the first time and after 30 minutes had gone by, they quite possibly were still not engaged—or had become unengaged a second time. Across each of the three days of observation, Kaiser’s lectures exceeded 60 minutes—enough time that some students may have become restless.

What also leads me to this conclusion is the change of attentiveness among students after being given a chance to move around; during his longer lectures, Kaiser typically gives students a bathroom break. For example, on day 1 after lecturing for 40 minutes total, students are allowed to leave the room and socialize for about five minutes. What cues me in to this idea that students were talking because they had become disengaged is that when they return from break, and Kaiser resumes his lecture, no students are talking out of turn. The energy seemed to have gone back into the room.

The general setup of Kaiser’s lectures is that he talks (however entertaining that might be) and the students listen. His style is more like recitation than discussion and so students are not required to talk or to converse with either peers or him. It is when they have a break, or an activity, that students’ level of engagement increases. This is also evident on day 3 when students are asked to complete the Spartan/Athenian pair and share. They are able to interact with their peers, and most seemed to be on task until the end as they finished their assignments. This hypothesis becomes even more valid when one considers what Weinstein says on the topic: “Working with peers on tasks can enhance students’ motivation. Groupwork can also have a positive effect on achievement” (221). Thus, the group assignment that Kaiser gave on day 3 actually helps to illustrate this idea that students talk during lecture as they become disengaged. This activity—and/or a break—help to increase the level of performance and motivation exhibited by students.

In reference to students putting their heads down/not looking at the teacher:

1. Because this class takes place (even now) during first block, it can be deduced that students are tired. First block at Charlotte High School is 7:40am-9:15am. Regardless of what is going on in the front of the room, if the immediate activity does not require them to be actively engaged, students can easily become disengaged out of sheer exhaustion. There are numerous reasons why students might be feeling fatigue: staying up late the previous night, homework, stress, personal and family issues, poor health, and/or some are not “morning people.” Any one of these can be a factor in the ability of students to focus on the task at hand, and therefore decide to put their heads down.

Ormrod suggests that not every observation of student behavior is correlated with a deep issue or a problem in the classroom, with the teacher, and especially not with the student personally. This is evident when she says, “We [teachers] must remember that students’ current deficiencies are not necessarily indicative of long-term difficulties, and we must be careful that we don’t treat students inequitably based on low expectations and inaccurate attributions for their performance” (186). I need to be careful not to put too much emphasis on behavior that could be relatively easy to explain. If a couple students are putting their heads down due to fatigue, does that require a definite change in curriculum? Would those students still be tired and put their heads down with even with another lesson planned?

Time is a factor that plays against students in this situation. Due to the fact that this class is first block, the early hour might have something to do with the students that have decided to put their heads down. Time is also not in their favor given the length of the average lecture—which ranges from 40-60 minutes. This is plenty of time for students who are already tired to relax, try to become more comfortable, and be tempted to sleep. Most students in first block are juniors and seniors who have particularly demanding schedules. It is likely that some are stressed and/or overworked with what is assigned in Western Civilization as well as in their other classes. One indicator of this concept is on day 3 where no students put their heads down until much later in the block when Kaiser is lecturing. Even this I believe has something to do with the fact that students had been participating in activities all morning and when they saw Kaiser was going to be lecturing, they probably doubted the expectations on their active engagement had decreased.

2. Even though Kaiser and I find the subject matter (Western Civilization) very interesting, some students might be bored, may already know the information, or find ancient history irrelevant. If this is the opinion of students, putting their head down would not cause academic harm. Students may wonder what it would hurt to “tune out” when the information is completely irrelevant when prom is approaching, they are worried about a test in another class, or the simple fact that they are people living in 2008—who cares?

What brings me to this hypothesis is not so much what is observable on the students’ behalf but what elements are involved in the class overall. It is likely that students are bored and are putting their heads down simply because they are listening to lectures that last nearly 60 minutes at a time. Looking at all three days of observation, students only put their heads down during lecture. On day 3 when students were taking part in activities the first half of the block, no one had his/her head down. It was not until Kaiser was lecturing again that two students decided to put their heads down. Stemming from this is the problem that the study guides, which were given at the end of the block on days 1 and 3, are questions that come directly from information gathered from the textbook. Thus, Kaiser’s lectures have no immediate payoff—the textbook will give them the information needed to fill out the assignment. There are no tests, only projects, in which students can

later use the textbook. What is the vested interest in lecture material? Any quizzes given are entirely from textbook material.

Students that are having trouble with the particular topic or are struggling due to a learning disability may find the lecture format daunting and/or completely irrelevant. This particular form of irrelevance—where students do not see the link to their own lives nor understand what is being discussed—can also lead students to putting their heads down; after all, putting one's head down is another form of disengagement. Weinstein illustrates this struggle by saying, "For students with limited ability or learning disabilities, school may be a constant struggle to keep up with classmates and to maintain a sense of enthusiasm and motivation. Such students not only require instructional assistance (e.g. individualized activities, extra academic help, well-structured assignments, extra time), they may also need special encouragement and motivational support" (183). Students putting their heads down may be an indication of motivational issues towards the style—perhaps a different format would serve them better to bring about a higher performance rate and the incentive to do so.

When I compare these hypotheses, I come to the conclusion that it is most likely a mixture—in that students get bored with hearing the teacher talk and there is no real vested interest in what may be perceived as redundant information. Students can get the information from the textbook and will be required to use only that which comes from the text. Lectures tend to last for about 60 minutes, with no visuals or anything going on in the front of the room. If this is the case, it explains both forms of questionable behavior: talking and putting their heads down. If students are bored and/or find the information irrelevant, then they are probably disengaging in one of those two ways. Either way, the outcome is the same: either Kaiser or I talk and the students slowly tune out.

### **Identify the stakes**

No matter what decision I decide to make, everyone involved has a stake in the outcome. Thus, before I chose the method(s) I will implement, I need to deliberately examine the interests

of myself, my mentor teacher, students not exhibiting this behavior, and those that are. This is so that when I plan my course of action I will have already considered the positives and negatives for everyone.

As the main teacher this semester of Western Civilization, I have personal and professional gains, as well as and losses that come into play. If I choose to make any changes in the status quo, I could gain more attentiveness in class. I could also have students both more interested in what my lessons are about and using the information from them. If my attempts at making positive changes are successful, I may no longer see students talking off topic or putting their heads down. But there are potential setbacks; I could invest a great deal of time and effort into the lessons just to have the original outcome. Students may still talk to one another, put their heads down, or be lost with information. In the end, I might be taken back to my original question: what is the cause of the continued behavior?

Because I am only an intern, I am not the “teacher of record” at Charlotte High School—that is Kaiser, my mentor. As a result, he certainly has a vested interest in the outcome of my curriculum change. If both my students and I are successful at creating an interesting and engaging classroom community, Kaiser could have students that have a stake in this class, in learning, and a new approach to his own framework in the room. However, there is a certain inherent loss if it works. Kaiser might find that he is compelled to make changes that really are not his style; he may reconsider what he has been doing for nearly 13 years. With the possibility that it will not work, he may (as I might) be left wondering what exactly is causing students to either put their heads down or talk?

The students that have exhibited this behavior certainly share concern in what happens in their class atmosphere. Students that had been talking may benefit from lessons they find more

stimulating. Some may find a change in curriculum more interesting instead of simply watching/listening to the teacher in the front of the room. Others may become more motivated to listen and pay attention to the lectures if there is a direct consequence to missing the information. While some might not consider having to pay attention in class a “positive gain,” students may actually learn more than they would have in the current lesson structure.

With change come possible losses, though. Boredom, loss of interest, or irrelevance might not be the real reason why students are putting their heads down or talking. If they continue to exhibit this behavior and lose out on information given in lecture, students will become further behind in the class. Making changes would probably require that students are accountable for lecture material in which case they would become disadvantaged. Those students could suffer while I am attempting to increase learning.

It would be erroneous to lump all students into the same category and insinuate that they all have relatively the same stakes in the outcome of any curriculum, past or present. Not all students talk during class and/or put their heads down. It is quite possible that the status quo is working perfectly well for those students. Thus, students who have not been observed as such may have been satisfied with the current class format. Also, they may already be used to this type of format in other classes; the change may not work well for them. Even students with special needs might be more empowered by being able to gather information easily from a text and not lecture. They may lose out in the process of my trying to reach other students.

But just because not all students are talking or putting their heads down during lecture does not mean that they are not bored or think the lesson is irrelevant. These students may still be bored, though not nearly as openly. In effect, these students may benefit without having shown any observable signs of difficulty. They might become more interested as their

attentiveness in the lectures is rewarded. Also, if any students were distracted by others talking—and those students are no longer doing that—they could attain a better learning environment.

**Deliberation: Construct and compare options for action**

After having considered the possible reasons for student behavior and the vested interests of those involved, I have come up with alternatives to the status quo. Reflecting on only one course of action is probably not wise given what is at stake for so many people, so I will consider two that I feel could be realistically executed.

First of all, I could make the curriculum more visually stimulating and interactive. I would do this by integrating more geographical maps, PowerPoints, images, and activities in my lesson plans. It would not be enough to simply “add” these elements. For example, students would color more maps, be shown geographical maps (instead of make-shift drawings on the board), and those maps would all be discussed as a class.

Not only would this provide an example for students to draw from, they are much less likely to learn information incorrectly as a result of having labeled something wrong from the homework. As Ormrod puts it: “Students learn from both live and symbolic methods. We should provide numerous opportunities for students to observe us and others demonstrating important skills” (156). Learning to read maps and understand a place’s geographical locality is a skill that is not only cross-curricular, but is useful in understanding history, as well as for personal use; maps are an important part of getting around various avenues of a location. PowerPoints and images would help to bring in any visual learners. They would also serve to give students who might be on the verge of boredom something to look at. If a student is lost, a visual may aid in triggering understanding.

With this same alternative course of action, I could also bring in more information from outside the textbook, as well as put more information from lectures in quizzes. This goes along with the idea of making the lecture style more visual—maps, images, and PowerPoints would help to provide an avenue for bringing in outside information without creating an information overload. Using this information in quizzes, in turn, validates their use and rewards students who make the effort to remain engaged.

The second alternative is that I could simply increase the amount of what is currently in place. For instance, instead of having students color and label one map and fill out one study guide for a section, I could have students color more maps and do more book work. To be sure that this information stays relevant (on a strictly academic level) I would increase the amount of times they are formally assessed for the material in the textbook and lecture. This would equal one quiz either per week or two—as opposed to one per unit. In return with assigning extra work, it would be important to reduce the lecture time and increase activities.

Of course, there are advantages and risks to both alternatives. With the first option, the advantages are that I could reach a more diverse learning community. Adding visuals deliberately to aid lecture helps students who might be confused and would hopefully keep others interested. Students will also—by my bringing in more information—get a more enriched information bank out of each of the units covered.

With these advantages come a certain amount of risks. The lessons might become more visual, but if they are unsuccessful and do not benefit anyone, it has a chance of simply turning into time-consuming “fluff.” Adding too many visuals can pose another problem—illustrating the cliché that at times less is more. If too many images are used, are students actually

remembering enough of them to make a difference? Is it possible to bog them down with too many visuals to where they quickly lose their novelty? These are potential problems with this alternative.

By increasing the amount of what is already in place, as my second alternative requires, I would surely find the negatives and positives associated with it. A possible advantage to assigning more work is that students might be using the information in the class on a regular basis. This could become learning through repetition, which has a level of worth. If students are constantly opening their textbooks and having to use the same information, they may begin to remember it. Consequently, students that are busy with more maps and study guides are less likely to find the time to sleep or talk to others.

This leads to certain risks, though. Assigning more work takes a rote learning quality. If something is not functioning status quo, does simply increasing the amount of its use make learning occur? Students for whom this method is already falling short might find it even more daunting if the amount is simply increased. For instance, if filling out a study guide has not helped students learn, does filling out a study guide and doing additional bookwork suddenly increase learning? Or increase the investment in the information? The reality is that increasing the amount of work might not work, which is a risk for students and teachers alike.

I am going to choose the first option, mainly because I feel that the second option increases rote learning and places a harder workload on students who might be lost. Increasing what is already in place might not reach the learners that need more visuals or instruction in an alternate way. As Good puts it, "When learning processes and skills, students need not only verbal explanations, but also physical demonstrations" (385). Thus far, verbal instruction alone



has been the primary style. I am persuaded that the first option is more likely to provide physical demonstrations and visuals for students than either the status quo or the second option.

The second alternative leans toward a more information-centered outcome—which may rectify the symptoms of student behavior as opposed to the underlying causes. If students are bored, lost, and/or are finding the information to be irrelevant, then how does increasing the amount of information delivered in relatively the same way increase students' motivations in the classroom? Does increasing the informational load do justice for students who may already be struggling with the lecture format?

The first option, in which I would incorporate more visuals and activities into the classroom, provides an opportunity for changing the instructional style. If I bring in more visuals and make students more accountable for lecture material—or material outside of their textbook—then I might reach a broader range of learning styles. Inherently, this would also increase relevance for some (and hopefully most) students, increase interest, and likely decrease boredom. Students may simply become more motivated to learn material they do not find so daunting. According to Ormrod, “As teachers, we can often motivate students to study classroom subject matter by arousing curiosity and stimulating situational interest [a form of intrinsic motivation], as well as by capitalizing on individual personal interests” (185). This guides me to conclusion that not only should visuals be brought into the classroom, but the visuals should be as relevant to students' personal interests and lives as is possible and/or appropriate.

### **Plan it**

In order for these modifications to work successfully the way I envision, there are seven specific elements in the classroom that I intend to change. These include posting the agenda,

recapping information from the previous day, the use of PowerPoint presentations, geographical maps and discussion, groupwork, regular movement, and a more acute organization of classroom material.

- **Agenda:** Each day the agenda—a breakdown of the day’s activities—will be placed in the front of the classroom in a printed form, available for students to see. The agenda will also be read at the beginning of the block to students. Expectations on completion will be reiterated.
- **Recap:** After the agenda has been read, the teacher will communicate a condensed version of the lesson from the previous day, accompanied with visuals, of what was discussed previously. The “recap” will be a series of highlights from the lesson from the day before.
- **PowerPoint:** A PowerPoint will accompany nearly every lecture. They will not have words on most slides, only images or diagrams. The PowerPoints will be used as a backdrop for the teacher’s lesson; this will be a slideshow of images of what is being discussed. Images will include pictures (or pictures of statues) of people and places in history.
- **Maps:** Students will be expected to color and label maps, which will be discussed after completion. Each unit, and every corresponding section within it, will have a map assignment. These will be given at the end of the lesson. The maps will be used to illustrate the geographical location in historical reference. Maps will also be included on PowerPoint presentations.
- **Groupwork:** Groupwork (including pair and share activities) will be incorporated into nearly every lesson. Groupwork will typically require puzzle solving on the behalf of the students involved. Most groupwork assignments will be given a grade for effort.
- **Movement:** The 20-minute rule will be instated into nearly every lesson. This is when a teacher alters the course of the lesson in some way within 20-minute intervals. For example: lecture, then activity, then break, then discussion, then lecture, then homework assignment.
- **Organization of Material/Deliberate Use of Ten Themes:** The ten themes (currently in place) will be used more frequently to mold discussions, groupwork, assignments, and lecture. They will be the basis behind nearly every piece of material in class. The ten themes include:

Religious Influence  
Geographic Impact

Sense of Self  
Basis of Authority  
Basis of Wealth and Trade  
Development of Technology  
Gender Relations  
Humanities  
Education  
Social Structure

Students will be formally assessed on class material through the lens of the ten themes of Western Civilization. This will take the form of homework, quizzes, and final unit projects and the final exam.

### **Keep track of what happens**

In order to properly gauge the level of success/failure of my plan, am going to keep a significant sample of student work from the past unit(s) to compare with the work submitted by students after the plan has been implemented. This will include final projects, quiz scores, maps, and homework. In making sure that a valuable comparison can be made, similar assignments and quizzes will be assigned to measure improvement, or lack thereof. While comparing the previous submissions with those that are current, I will be considering these questions specifically:

- Does student behavior change? Are there less students talking and/or putting their heads down?
- Do student quiz scores increase? If yes, is it overall or can the correct scores be linked to either the lecture or book material specifically? If not, is there a consensus among the class of which answers they got wrong?
- Are students' understandings of the ten themes in relation to the material deepening?

### **Evaluate the attempt**

Putting the option I chose into practice was much more complicated than I had originally anticipated. I knew that showing more visuals, increasing the level of activities, and the inclusion of outside material in the classroom would require plenty of work on my part, but I had not

realized how much time and energy it would cost. Gathering information, without even putting it in the form of a lesson plan, took an extended amount of effort. After only one week of this, I found myself tiring of conducting so much outside research, only to have to spend an equal amount of time figuring out how to successfully execute it. Can a teacher kept this up for an entire school year? Of course, there are trade-offs in that once a majority of the research has been done, it can be carried through the following year(s) with relative ease. This is an initial investment.

One of the issues that took so much of my personal time was that I had to search diligently to find all the images and diagrams I had hoped I could include while devising this plan in the first place. There were not always images that properly illustrated course material. For instance, the Sumerians invented the umbrella and the metal plow; I simply could not find historically accurate images of them. In fact, what I found was not even close—they were relatively modern. I put the images on a PowerPoint presentation and this had me wondering, did my objective in including the pictures match with what actually happened? Will students remember the modern illustration or the historical description I gave? I am afraid they will remember the images without any—or very little—recollection of what I described.

Another downfall with my plan is that some of the maps required even more explanation than was necessary. I spent an average of 5-8 minutes on each map. Some maps had to be explained—this was especially the case when maps were graphical in their illustration of information. For example, one map showed the movement of peoples from the Arabian Peninsula and modern-day Turkey to the Fertile Crescent—including populous numbers to different regions. Did this create more confusion? Did they learn more simply because this was

visual? Was the time it took to explain the map have a diminishing effect on the use of the visual? These are questions I was left with after reflecting on my experience.

Not everything was negative—in fact there were many positives that I observed. First of all, in recapping, groupwork, and especially with keeping to the “20-minute rule,” I had much more student-teacher interaction during lessons. Students appeared more engaged when I did lecture. I made an effort to gauge student body language while they were involved in different classroom activities (such as those described previously). If my lecturing started to sustain a 25 minute period, I observed an increase in blank facial expressions and several students slumped down in their seats. That was when—regardless of where I was in lecture—students would be required to move into a group activity, take a break, watch a video clip, or I would stop talking and ask students for their input on the topic. This seemed to make a difference. I began hearing from students who I had never observed interacting publicly in class.

Groupwork in particular was a success. Student-student interaction during these activities was more involved than before. At first when I mentioned that we were going to be doing and activity, some students groaned. But after several days of this, I believe they began to get used to the routine. I know that my class takes place first block and it can be difficult to work up the motivation to move around, but students actually started to switch gears quickly once they realized the activities were becoming a daily practice. This observed less conversation between students during lectures. There were a couple that would whisper back and forth, but it would only last for a few seconds. I felt that because students were able to have social interaction at teacher-designated appropriate times, they knew what was expected while I was talking.

Quiz scores increased overall. I am hesitant to put too much emphasis on this as a positive to be attributed to the success of my plan. This is because prior to choosing my

alternative, we had taken one quiz and students have only taken one prior to this observation. Not only is it possible that lower quiz scores could have been an issue of unclear expectations on the first quiz, I find it faulty to compare only two quizzes to assess an overall victory. Yet, the average student's quiz score increased.

Finally, the ease and depth with which the ten themes were discussed as a class drastically improved. Every day at least one of the ten themes of Western Civilization was included in lecture, groupwork, and/or assignments. When the semester began, the themes were introduced and students completed a short activity with them. However, when asked about the themes in class thereafter, I observed blank stares from students. After a minute wait time, one student would usually volunteer an answer. Unfortunately, those answers were not always on track. Since including the themes more rigorously into the class in relation to course material, I have literally had zero wait time when students are asked about them. In fact, several students offer answers and typically they are all extremely insightful. This has been a particularly rewarding experience for me—I hope students are now getting more out of the class because of this as well.

While some aspects went well and others poorly, there were gains and losses for all of us. Time was lost for both students and I. I lost personal time in the attempts to bring in outside information, visuals, and deliberately exhausting the ten themes; this took hours of careful planning on my part. I had a personal investment of time. But time was also lost for students. In doing more activities and discussing history with visuals took extra time in covering material. Kaiser was able to basically cover one chapter section in the class each day. Adding all these additional elements required one to two days for the same chapter section. Overall, that is significantly more time lost (and possibly more material lost). We might not cover as much in

this semester as Kaiser previously did. This of course presents a loss for Kaiser. When he takes over his class in April, the class might be farther behind normal and either he will have to catch up, or remove a unit from the curriculum. Since this is not a core class—it is an elective—I have already been assured that it is not an issue of concern. However, given that I will also be teaching core classes, I have to consider whether I would have had the liberty of making such changes without the extra curricular time to support it.

Overall, this experience has improved my teaching practice from last semester. I am much more comfortable with student-centered activities than before. Although I started groupwork with great hesitation, I pulled it off and feel that it has been a success. This experience has made history a more intricate topic in my own thinking—and based on my students' most recent submitted work—in theirs as well. We are using the information in more meaningful ways; this has made my teaching much more deliberate. It has also brought more visuals into a classroom that hardly had any before. More outside sources are being used—not simply a textbook dating to the 1980s. And finally, my lessons have become much more dynamic. I am learning to make information clearer to students through different methods of instruction. I also believe this has aided in reaching multiple learners. By having visuals each day, increased geographical maps, a discussion to accompany them, and a deliberate use of the ten themes, I have not only found teaching more rewarding, I hope I have made it so for my students. This has changed my daily practice.

Of course this plan was not perfect and will need further revisions. I believe my immediate subsequent course of action will be two-fold. I am going to try to reduce the quantity of visuals—in hopes to increase quality—and institute short answer questions into my quizzes for each chapter. The quizzes, rather than by unit, will be for each chapter. Not only will this

hold students accountable for course material, it will hopefully decrease the chances that students will have forgotten all of a chapter's information before they are ever assessed on it.

As far as visuals, I am going to attempt to less vigilant on using them simply for the sake of having them. I will scale back the amount of visuals and try to make sure they are more meaningful—that way they do not require further explanation in and of themselves. My goal in including visuals is to make the information more digestible to students, not make it too complex. Based on my evaluations of how this plan went, I can see that time has been a major cost for my students, Kaiser, and I. Because this affects everyone involved, I am certain that a change that will reduce the amount of time it takes for preparation, explanation, and learning will be a worthwhile solution.

A short answer section in my quizzes—where students must explain, identify, or relate information—would best serve multiple learners as well. Not everyone learns the same way, so how can it be assumed that everyone benefits from the same test format? If one of my goals in this entire project is to reach individual students, then I believe that altering my formal assessments is a valuable extension of what I have already attempted to institute. In the short answers, students will be arbitrarily given one of the ten themes and will be required to use course material in relation to that theme. Thus, not only is the curriculum relevant, the actual scheme with which the information is learned is also significant. Students must study and become prepared for all ten themes. Through the lens of a teacher, this will aid me in formally assessing student understanding of the ten themes before their final projects. If any students appear to be misinterpreting anything, I might better serve the student's needs by observing the problem sooner.



Thus far, I believe the benefits have outweighed any setbacks and so I plan to continue with my original course of action. With these adjustments, I will hopefully be closer than ever before to getting to the root of the problem of students that might be bored, lost, and/or feeling that the material is irrelevant. Through all this, I believe I am reaching more students on an individual basis—in which case both my students and I have benefited from the overall experience.

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