Does Lecturing Have a Place in the Social Studies Classroom?

The October 2009 issue of *Social Education* included an article by Jason Stacy, a historian and social studies educator at Southern Illinois University. In the article, "The Guide on Stage: In Defense of Good Lecturing in the History Classroom" (275), Stacy challenges the idea that good teaching means student-centered instruction.

According to Stacy, "It is wrong to assume that certain methods of teaching are inherently poor pedagogy." Stacy loves lecturing and performing in front of the classroom and claims that his secondary school students loved and responded to this approach. For Stacy and his students, good learning required "listening and, maybe, thinking," and most important, that the teacher be "entertaining." He promotes lecturing as a highly efficient information delivery system.

Stacy calls his approach interactive lecturing. He organizes his lectures around a historical problem, a comparison, or the defense of a particular thesis. His lectures are very structured. If Stacy speaks for ten minutes, students spend two minutes discussing an open-ended question based on the lecture. If he speaks for twenty minutes, students discuss two open-ended questions for two minutes each. Stacy coordinates a Teaching American History grant in Illinois where he pressed for this approach to teaching.

Social Science Docket asked social studies teachers and teacher educators in New York and New Jersey to reply to Jason Stacy's arguments.

Alan Singer, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, editor, *Social Science Docket*: I have no doubt that Jason Stacy is a wonderful lecturer, but I think he confuses teaching and learning social studies with watching television. For most people, but obviously not all, watching television is a passive experience. Yes, sometimes they think; but watching television is primarily about entertainment. Usually people only stir to get snacks or go to the bathroom.

People in our society adopt a wide range of styles in the ways that they dress, work, and live their lives. Their styles suit their personalities, talents, preferences, and experiences. Teachers are no different. Some prefer and consider themselves more effective using one style or method of teaching, some prefer others, and some experiment with different approaches. Early in my teaching career, my lessons tended to be teacher-centered largely because I was unsure of myself and afraid of what would happen if students experienced freedom in the classroom. Whether I was struggling with students to get them to complete a particular assignment or was entertaining them in an attempt to draw them into lessons, I tried to hold the classroom reins tightly in my hands. It was not until I became more confident of my own knowledge of social studies and in my ability as a teacher that I was comfortable organizing a classroom where students actively participated as historians and social scientists, and were allowed to make choices about what and how they would learn.

Although I am an advocate of student-centered, activity-based, lessons, I do not believe there is only one way to teach a social studies lesson, or that it is desirable to always teach the same way. A strength of the activity-based approach to teaching is that the types of activities teachers can use are very different. They include analyzing primary source documents, discussions, graphing and mapping, singing and dancing, dramatics, or creating cartoons, posters, and poems. What the activities have in common is that they all involve students in learning by doing. Variety in instructional methods helps keep students interested, and flexibility in lesson design allows teachers to take into account the dynamic of a particular class.

Acknowledging that competent teachers can have different teaching styles does not mean that all teaching is equally effective for every grade level and for achieving every classroom goal. Advocates of direct instruction (e.g., lecturing, "chalk and talk" -- the teacher says something and then writes it on the board) claim that students in their classrooms learn because the classrooms are well structured and students remain focused. Students are told what they need to know, drilled to impress it on their memories, required to copy from the board, tested, and either punished or rewarded based on their scores.

I am suspicious about what students actually learn in this kind of classroom. If John Dewey is correct, and experience is the most significant teacher, then, whatever the content presented in these classes, the primary lessons students learn are related to values and

behavior. Students learn to be passive, to submit to authority without questioning, to blend in, to remain silent and hidden, to memorize enough data so they can pass a test, to avoid the consequences of a poor grade, and that people should compete rather than work together. They learn that some people's ideas are not valued and that, although teachers have the right to choose a teaching style that suits them, there is no room for individual difference in student learning styles.

Direct instruction classrooms, even those that claim to be interactive, run counter to the kind of classrooms and effective teaching described by people like Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, and James Banks. I think this is the case in any secondary school subject, but especially for social studies, where our expressed goals include developing active citizens and critical thinkers prepared to offer leadership in a democratic society.

Sometimes pre-service teachers ask me, "Is it ever okay to lecture?" They are talking about lessons dominated by extended presentations of information or long, detailed answers to student questions. For middle school social studies classes, my answer is always "no." When teachers do this, they only lose the students.

In high school, I think that this kind of "teacher talk" should be avoided. At best, it is a last resort, when a teacher is unable to find a way to involve students in examining materials and questions. I do not mean that a teacher is not allowed to express any ideas or answer a question. Rather, I am suggesting that, instead of launching into long extemporaneous monologues, we need to find materials that make it possible for students to participate in our lessons.

Formal lectures -- the kind we associate with college classes, where a teacher thinks out loud about an idea while students are jotting down their reactions and questions -- can be consistent with an activity-based approach. High school students need to be able to gather, organize, and evaluate information that is presented in a number of forms. When a teacher has a clear skills goal for students, an engaging manner, an interesting topic, and uses the technique judiciously, formal lecturing can be an effective approach. But it should not be your primary approach to teaching social studies.

In the last couple of years, I organized a series of six short lectures of about twenty minutes each for students in an inner-city high school who wanted to experience a college-style classroom. Prior to the lectures, students were given a list of the main themes that were going to be introduced and spent a class period examining the primary source documents that would be referred to in the presentation. During the lecture they took notes and then they met in small groups to discuss their understanding of the material and their questions. This was followed by a full class discussion. For homework, students were assigned a 500-word, two-page essay answering a question posed during the lecture. These essays were presented in class and discussed the next day.

Jason Stacy calls himself a guide on the stage. He may be a good entertainer, but whatever his students say, I am not convinced his approach is good social studies teaching.

Rozella Kirchgaessner, High School for Law Enforcement, Queens, NY, President of the Association of Teachers of Social Studies: Based upon the description offered by Jason Stacy, I would not refer to the practice he uses as lecturing in the traditional sense of the term. An effective educator presents data in the form of text or commentary using a variety of forms and formats. Whether that format involves a map, graph, chart, video presentation, interactive dialog, PowerPoint or a ten minute lecture, so long as there is interactive processing time allotted and the opportunity for weighted and thoughtful discussion, it could realistically fit into a "workshop" model lesson. The major problem I have with a lecture is the lack of opportunity for listeners to process and respond to the information and/or concepts presented. Many lecturers are oblivious to the interests, concerns, or perspectives of their listeners and are more interested in indoctrination than in information processing. A common rule of thumb for attention maintenance is a person's age. Thus, the average fifteen year old can focus attention for approximately 15 minutes. Any presentation, including a lecture, which extended longer than that time frame would require some level of interactive processing at roughly the same intervals to retain effectiveness.

Charles Howlett, Molloy College, Rockville Centre, NY: I am fond of reminding teachers and students of a story that took place in the early 1940s between the noted publisher Alfred A. Knopf and the leading Columbia University cultural historian Jacques Barzun. Knopf approached Barzun and asked him to consider

writing a book about teaching. To which Barzun responded why would anyone be interested. Knopf politely responded by simply stating, “the substance of what we think, though born in thought, must live in ink.” Barzun then considered Knopf request and the end product was an important book entitled, “Teacher in America.”

If teachers put their thoughts and ideas into "ink" the result of such endeavor would be exciting and worthwhile lectures. Clearly, lecturing is a necessary component for social studies educators to organize their thoughts and information. It should be the passageway to more effective engagement with students. Combining lectures with primary source documents and visuals should make daily lessons more interesting. The important point is that lecturing forces educators to put their ideas and information into proper context. It is not about copying information from the textbook. Rather, lecturing enables educators to think through the information they need to convey to their students. It also enables them to work as actors in the process of engagement and processing.

For me, lecturing is not all about talking and reading a script. Instead, it is a form of organized information delivery. Lecturing requires social studies educators to get their act together, to become involved in the delivery of historical information, and, most importantly, to make discerning and critical judgments. For these very reasons, lecturing is not power point script reading. It is actually writing the essence of history from one's own perspective and then relating it to student comprehension and learning. If done right, lecturing not only engages students but requires them to listen carefully and take notes in a discriminating and judicious fashion. Let's not abandon lecture for the sake of entertainment and expediency.

Catherine Snyder, Union College, Schenectady, NY: I agree with the premise: It is wrong to assume that certain methods of teaching are inherently poor pedagogy. Poor pedagogy, in my opinion, is anything that does not work with a group of students in a particular setting at a particular time. In other words, a method that might work effectively with a group of 9th graders in September might be poor pedagogy by April. In order to effectively deliver instruction, teachers have to be continually aware of their students’ learning styles combined with their evolving abilities. The lecture technique de scribed by Dr. Stacey only offers the opportunity to teach a limited set of skills within the social studies curriculum. It offers the opportunity for students to practice keen listening skills, something most educators would agree our students need to practice, but there is only limited opportunity for discourse and analysis and no opportunity for application. Adolescents need more than two or four minutes to pursue a line of inquiry; particularly if it is new material, which a lecture presumably would be. Because they are hearing material for the first time, they need to establish a frame of reference for the new learning before genuine critical discourse and application (something Dr. Stacey’s method does not offer) are possibilities. Also, like any method, if used too often it would privilege one kind of learning over others. While I would welcome Dr. Stacey’s method into my repertoire as a teacher, I would use it sparingly and with carefully selected curriculum.

Paul Vermette, Niagara University, Lewiston, NY: I have many questions for Jason Stacey. If we recall that thinking causes learning, we have to ask, “Where does the student thinking happen?” in these lectures. Lecturing and storytelling (lecture’s little sibling) may really be good for learners, but how does he know? If the lesson involves questioning, Think-Pair-shares, and reaction papers, is it still a lecture?

If the telling comes after a powerful student experience, it may have some value in helping students understand what they have just experienced, but that is a big “IF”. If the lecture is immediately followed by student application of concepts or generalizations, then it may have some value (as long as teacher assesses quality of application). But students cannot practice “information” or a “story,” which is the focus of most social studies lectures.

Lecture may have a role if we believe that students do not need to learn anything in class (or a course) that may help them become better citizens or conceptually smarter people. If Social Studies (not just History) is only about “facts and stuff,” then it does not matter what students do in class; they do not even have to be there. Finally, if the lecture is a response to a real felt student question, and is followed by a student reaction to the lecture, then you have conversation that is a powerful learning tool, but not just a lecture. I have spent 15 years working with the History Department at Niagara University trying to get professors to cut back on lecturing, increase discussion, and add more engaging work to their classes. I am disappointed that

Stacey was published in *Social Education*. He sets classroom teaching back many years.

Michael Pezone, Law, Government, and Community Service Campus Magnet High School, Queens, NY: I don't know Jason Stacy, and have no reason to doubt that he is a fine educator who is well regarded by his students. What follows, therefore, are my concerns about lecturing as a pedagogical strategy and are not a commentary on his practice. My primary concern relates to the "hidden curriculum" embodied in the practice of lecturing. In addition to the content transmitted to students, they also learn that the teacher is an authority figure who possesses privileged knowledge; it is the teacher's responsibility to impart such knowledge, while students are passive recipients.

In addition, I am concerned that although students are encouraged and required to react "critically" to lectures, very few high school students are expert enough to analyze and dissect the ways in which historical issues and events are framed and defined by the lecturer's particular viewpoint.

While listening is a critically important skill for students to develop, why can't they read the material and then listen to one another during discussion? If the answer is that the educational experience depends on the delivery and showmanship of the lecturer, I humbly suggest that our role as educators should be to take a back seat and to empower students to be the primary actors in the classroom. I have always felt that it requires very little real talent for an educated adult to dazzle a roomful of children — the "teacher as entertainer" smacks of ego to me, sort of a pedagogical "hey, look at me!"

Sarah Roberts, Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo: "Do you lecture?" I asked the well-respected social studies educator. "Absolutely! Social studies is a series of great stories!" I was surprised by his response because I knew his classroom to be student-centered and interactive. However, on second thought, I knew I should not be surprised. When questioned about their interest in teaching social studies, prospective and current students of the University at Buffalo Graduate School of Education's Social Studies Education Program often respond that they love stories. Yet few, if any, have thought concretely about how to tell stories in their future social studies classroom. For this reason in fall 2009, I included interactive lecturing as a pedagogical method in my social studies methods course.

The pre-service teachers wanted to learn how to tell stories well and the veteran educator suggested I teach them. What we learned together, however, is that interactive lecturing was not the means to do so, at least not for us. We practiced critical and active listening skills together; we wrote lesson plans with detailed lectures embedded with content knowledge, prompts to engage students in critiquing the content; we prepared student guides for note-taking and to hone listening skills; we practiced lecturing. As their professional knowledge grew during the semester through classroom observations and through their studies, they realized that lecturing well does not necessarily equate to telling stories for the purpose of engaged and critical listening, learning, or teaching. Paulo Freire wrote that we must read "the world in a word." Next year, I will be teaching storytelling as a social studies teaching and learning method instead of interactive lecture. While storytelling is a form of lecturing, conceptually it sets a different mood in the classroom. Pre-service teachers loved social studies because they loved the stories, not because they loved the lectures.

John Gunn, Queens College - CUNY: In his October 2009 article in *Social Education* Jason Stacy defends the use of "the interactive lecture" in "the history classroom." For Stacy an "interactive lecture" is distinguished from ordinary lectures by two features: 1) interspersed within the lecture, time is allotted for student discussion of lecture content and 2) an "interactive lecture" may be: "problem-centered," "comparative" or "thesis-driven." Stacy's defense of the interactive lecture is driven by the disfavor of the lecture form in schools of education and among administrators and his enjoyment of lecturing and his perception that lecturing is enjoyed by colleagues and students and that it is effective.

Stacy attempts to ground his defense of the interactive lecture in constructivist theory. He claims the "essence of the constructivist model of learning," is captured by the statement, "In history knowledge of factual material is required before a student can begin to interact with the material" and he goes on to elaborate, "An interactive lecturer . . . presents new material in the context of known material, fostering moments that demand "assimilation" and "accommodation" (275).

Although there is disagreement over what constitutes constructivism and how it might be translated into classroom practice, Stacy's interactive lecture collides with a core assumption of constructivism, i.e., that students' learn by actively constructing knowledge. In Orwellian manner Stacey uses constructivist concepts to camouflage traditional teaching. In *How Teachers Taught* Larry Cuban (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993) developed the concept of "teacher-centered" instruction to describe the predominant patterns of pedagogy in U.S. schools, and particularly high schools, he discovered have been in existence over the last century. Stacy's interactive lecture is an exemplar of teacher centered instruction because of its reliance on teacher talk, whole-class instruction, the teachers' control of time and of course content. In *A Place Called School* John Goodlad (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. 1984), and colleagues noticed that this form of instruction was prevalent and correlated with "high levels of student passivity."

Given Stacy's amnesia it is useful to recall Dewey's alternative view which models "assimilation" and "accommodation" of curricular concepts and methods without reifying either of them. In *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1990), Dewey presented the concepts "voluntary" and "reflective" attention to theorize students' psychological investment with a problem or question. Dewey defined voluntary attention as, "when the child entertains results in the form of problems or questions, the solution of which he [sic] is to seek for himself." Reflective attention, a concept close to constructivism's notion of "metacognition," is defined as existing when " . . . the child can conceive of the end as something to be found out, discovered; and can control his [sic] acts and images so as to help in the inquiry and solution" (146).

In *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1990) Dewey reminds us that disciplinary knowledge developed over the breadth of human history as a result of concerted human efforts to organize and systematize experience (189-190). The contemporary upshot is that disciplinary knowledge often appears as "logically ordered facts" which are "torn away from their original place in experience." (184) As an antidote to this dilemma of modernity, Dewey argues that curricula need to be "psychologized" (i.e., made meaningful for students) by "reinstating into experience the subject matter of the studies" (200). Dewey's argument suggests that students will be engaged in social studies, or history, if they are allowed to pose questions rooted in their experience without being initially constrained by the disciplinary concepts and content. With regard to social studies, Goodlad comments that in a subject that "would appear to be of great human interest . . . the topics of study become removed from their intrinsically human character, reduced to the dates and places readers will recall memorizing for tests" (212). Dewey's notion that curricular knowledge is ultimately derived from human experience and projects offers clues as to how one might introduce students to problems and to develop understanding of disciplinary concepts in a social studies class.

At the conclusion *How Teachers Taught,* Larry Cuban attempted to explain the century-long persistence of teacher-centered instruction he chronicled. He argued that central to the persistence of teacher-centered instruction are "long term cultural beliefs about the nature of knowledge" and "what teaching and learning should be." (260) Cuban states the belief that teaching and learning " . . . depended on those who were informed telling the uninformed what was important to know" arose "millennia ago" (248) Stacey's belief, sited above, that students must first learn history facts and content before they can "begin to interact with the material" is a modern version of this millennia-old viewpoint. This belief makes the constructivist goal of integrating of new knowledge into students' preexisting knowledge difficult since it presumes that social studies content is removed from students' questions and experience.

Stacy's defense and enjoyment of the interactive lecture is understandable. We know from Cuban and Goodlad that when Stacy began teaching there were few models of constructivist teaching available. The absence of such models would make learning and applying abstract pedagogical theory difficult. The prevalence of teacher-centered instruction may help us understand Stacy's widely shared sentiment that he "took precious little from my education classes." A brief list of other causes for the educational landscape Stacy entered into, and came to view as positive, would include administrative resistance to constructivist modes of teaching, a lack of clarity of the proper goals of social studies or history courses, and the enormous demands that moving to student centered instruction would place on teachers to rethink curricula and to manage students in this new cognitive environment. It is perhaps not surprising that researchers have recently

noticed that schools that have been able to raise student achievement have also been ones strong professional communities characterized by high degrees of inter-teacher trust and teacher capacity to effect school change and whose professional communities are deeply focused on instructional issues. One imagines that had Stacy been lucky enough to be a teacher in such a school his education classes might have made more sense and he might have developed a more substantive conception of constructivism.

D.W. is a member of the New Jersey Council for the Social Studies who asked that her name and school district not be included.

Some of my fondest memories of college were the many lectures sponsored by campus organizations that held me captivated in my spare time. When I began substitute teaching, after having students complete the assigned work left by their teachers, I found that I was able to engage my student audiences with mini-lectures for the balance of the time period. I worked inner city schools in three different urban districts and the students I reached the most and fastest included those least expected to succeed otherwise. Some students actually tried cutting their regular classes to hear my lectures and many teachers and supervisors complimented my ability to capture and hold the attention of students who often had difficulty in school.

After many years of teaching full time, I believe some of my greatest classroom experiences and outcomes as a high school teacher have come from the occasional lectures I have given. So much of modern educational pedagogy concludes that lectures are an ineffective means to educate. However, everything from the looks on my students' faces, to their increased participation, *unrequested* comments, plus year-end surveys, tells me otherwise.

My lectures do not ban students from participating. A period of time is always left at the end for questions and comments and for activities, but the majority of the class period is reserved for lecturing with some type of assessment.

When I read the request from the *Social Science Docket* for responses to a teacher who said lecturing can be a crucial method for teaching, I jumped at the opportunity. It is something I have long been passionate about yet felt helpless in the face of all the contrary "master teacher" dogma that dictates how we should be teaching. At times and places with emphasis on course pacing, some lecturing allows more content coverage; something crucial in survey courses such as history that have a very broad curriculum.

I recently hosted a couple of English teachers who are in a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) program in China. During their stay they gave a power point assisted lecture as part of their presentation about cultural aspects of China. One of the things I learned from them was that in China (at least places where they have lived and taught), the only type of teaching expected is lectures. Students are not expected to participate and resist efforts to encourage them to do otherwise. Although I disagree with the idea that discouraging student participation is good teaching methodology, and I definitely believe that active, student-centered learning should be the primary practice, my point is that lectures are valid, for at least part of a lesson, and should not be completely eliminated.

At a time when there is tremendous concern about improving student academic performance, it is worth noting that students in and from China do exceedingly well on national and international standardized tests. In fact, surveys and studies generally show they do better than students who are educated in the United States, despite, or perhaps because of, their lecture-centered teaching pedagogy. It seems to me that is a good argument for infusing some lecturing into social studies instruction.