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Active Learning vs. Lecturing: A Current Overcorrection

Dylan Berman, News Editor

Something I, and any Seattle University student I'm sure, have seen in syllabi and heard said by professors numerous times is the phrase "discussion-based." The prevalence of this type of classroom organization was solidified for me when a UCOR professor said something along the lines of "lecture is now often a dirty word." Gone are the days when students were the silent audience for the speaking expert, the "sage on the stage," as titled by my mom, who teaches math at a university level. For decades, this was the common structure of college classrooms, but it has fundamentally shifted. The current emphasis is on things like "active learning," and class discussions. This shift could not be more obvious than in Seattle U's own class evaluations, which ask students to rank how well a professor created an environment of active learning.

As opposed to the traditional structure of a lecture, a silent audience taking in information for the length of the class, active learning is the idea of engaging students as participants in the learning process, be it through the use of class or small group discussions, activities where students work their way to the answer or idea instead of simply being told it, or a variety of other educational methods.

I am not opposed to the concept of active learning. For me and many students, some amount of active participation helps keep a class engaging and stimulates independent thought and thorough understanding.

But we have gone too far. In a reaction against the rigid lecture system, academia has become obsessed with terms like "active learning," and tools like class discussion, and needs to learn to integrate those ideas, while still preserving something of the original lecture format.

My experience in many UCORs and even major-specific classes, is classroom structure revolving almost entirely around smaller group or full class discussion, or other "active learning" methods, leaving little room for traditional instruction from the professor. I see a few issues with this.

One is the question of why I want to be in a college classroom in the first place. It is not to hear from others my age, often similarly uneducated in the subject of the class. It is to hear from a professor who has spent years of their life becoming an expert in the field. I don't mean to say that substantial class or group discussions don't exist, or that student voices have nothing to offer, just that they shouldn't take up significantly more space than that of the professor. The truth is that many students don't have all that much substantial or newly informative knowledge to say about a subject, because they are there to become educated in the subject in the first place. I often feel like these class discussions eat up the majority of class time, and don't actually leave me with much new information or perspective. I could get a lot more from yes, just sitting and listening to the professor, who obviously has a lot more to say on whatever area they wrote a dissertation in than a student whose first exposure to these ideas was weeks ago.

Another problem is participation. What often happens in these discussions is around three students contributing a lot, while most of the class falls silent. Professors try to get around this by making participation part of one's grade, but when you force people to speak for a grade, you often find them grasping at straws for something to say, instead of genuinely engaging in meaningful discussion. This ties back to everything I've said questioning the amount of genuine information gained during these discussions. In

smaller group discussions, I've sometimes found myself in a position of trying my best to get other students to have a conversation, but mostly just speaking to people who are either shy, didn't really think about the reading or topic up for discussion, or didn't do the required reading at all. This is especially common in UCORs where I see this heavily discussion-based structure most often.

I think including class or group discussions as well as other forms of active learning should be a part of classroom structure. However, these discussions should be guided and facilitated by the professor to a greater extent than they currently are. Active learning, while important, needs to leave more room than it currently does for just sitting down and listening, for the traditional lecture. A professor knows more than their students, and their job is to impart that knowledge to us. Part of that job may be helping us fully grasp new information through discussion and active learning, but right now, we do that so much that it takes away from the worth of class time. Part of that job must also be lecturing, and I believe we need to make more space for that than currently exists in the common classroom structure.