

The First Ten Things I Learned in the Wilderness

#4 Stop Talking at Me!

I was once a serial lecturer.

I'm in recovery now and feel good that I'm no longer part of the grand delusion – talking at people, telling them what to do, is how a civilized society transfers knowledge, raises its children, and maintains order.

The loss of my previous self was not easy. I went through the usual stages of grief including denial, anger, and acceptance. I occasionally backslide, but every day gets a little easier. I hit rock bottom and realized I needed to reform shortly after delivering what I was sure was a brilliant lecture to a class of university students about a year ago.

Everything I did seemed to come together that day. I had communicated my thoughts so clearly and my audience was attentive. They laughed at all my jokes. The powerpoint slides were timed perfectly. I continually checked for understanding during the lecture, provided a creative outline for the students to use for note taking, and summarized the main ideas at the end. I felt everyone really absorbed all the key points of my primary thesis - how fire suppression is *protecting* the chaparral from *too much* fire.

Then the horrible moment arrived – a question from a student as I was walking back to my car. “How do we allow more fires to burn in the chaparral to clean out all the unnatural growth caused by fire suppression?”

I've been teaching for more than 30 years. I've lectured a lot. All throughout college, high school, and junior high school I was lectured to. My dad lectured me. When I go to science conferences I run from room to room to await the presenter's lecture. When attending field trips, I usually spend hours in the car to arrive at appointed places for someone to lecture to the group about something we are looking at. Workshops that sound like interactive experiences usually end up with the presenter lecturing to us.

I can't remember much of what the lecturers have said, even when I enjoyed listening to them. I usually ignored my dad. I often did the exact opposite of what he demanded. In fact, I've never lost the tendency to ramp up whatever behavior I'm being told *not* to do. It never fails to amaze me the number of things I've suggested to my family, only to have them ignore my words of wisdom. At some point it should have become obvious that telling doesn't work, yet I persisted until that student's “inane” question.

As I had thought in the past, I just couldn't believe the student asked the question. I dismissed the whole affair as a case of classroom distraction. Then I became angry, like I did in the past. "What an idiot!" I thought to myself. "How on earth could someone sit through an entire lecture and fail to grasp the most important and well explained point?" I remember mumbling the same thing as a high school biology teacher when students did poorly on an exam. "We talked about this stuff for two weeks! What were you doing all that time?"

Over the following month or so I made a number of excuses for what had happened at the university, mostly focusing on my own presentation style, and resolved that next time I would modify my approach. I would make it better. The problem, however, was that I had done this in the past a lot too – *trying to make my lecture better*.

The realization that I was failing to achieve my educational goals spun around in my head one afternoon while hiking with a friend up a mountain in the Anza-Borrego Desert. Melancholy descended upon me. I entertained the possibility of focusing on something else – writing, photography, hiking. "What's the use?" I kept thinking to myself, "if after countless lectures, people come away believing the same idiotic misconceptions they had when they first showed up?"

At this juncture, I was confronted with a severe case of cognitive dissonance. My educational paradigm was being challenged by overwhelming data. I didn't like it.

Of the two paths one can take when such a challenge is presented, I had previously chosen cognitive incompetence over acceptance. I had rejected the new information, engaged in logical fallacies to rationalize what I was seeing, and kept on doing the same thing over and over again. For reasons that are still a mystery to me, the university student's question changed all this. It finally sunk in. Lecturing doesn't work. In fact, lecturing is one of our social ills.

The social pathology caused by the lecture paradigm became clear to me during while my friend and I sat on a large boulder in the quiet of the desert air during the philosophical hours between daylight and night. We talked about why so many allow so few to tell them what to do.

Children, who are naturally curious and eager to test boundaries, are continually lectured to grow up, to act their age. The consequence is a slow, but steady repression of curiosity and the creation of adults who resemble the walking dead. Students who cannot retain the information in their lecture notes long enough for the exam, fail, and often end up as emotional refugees in a society that measures success with academic credentials and obedience. Police become irrational and are driven to use lethal force when someone does not immediately obey their orders. People are susceptible to brain washing and Orwellian double speak because they are so used to being told

(lectured) what to do. Discussions become quickly polarized. Arguments are about winning rather than learning something new.

My friend on the boulder suggested there is a reason why many dystopian novels feature societies that have eliminated risk and conflict. The rulers established inflexible rules of behavior, only to collapse when a free thinker lashes out and leads a revolution. The novels sell because they tap into the inner frustration so many of us feel. We are sick of being told how to live, how to think. It's no wonder dystopian films are some of the most popular movies in the theaters. They provide a release, if only fantastical, from the social straitjackets we wear.

Telling may produce a complacent population for a while, but eventually it fails. There are always those few who refuse to be told what to do. Lecturing does not work for them. It doesn't work for most of us.



With what then do we replace the old lecture paradigm?

“Those who do the teaching, do the learning.”

This phrase has been gently repeated to me for years by my favorite teacher and life-long partner and wife, Vicki Halsey (2011), who has been using this approach for decades to help leaders communicate their visions. She provides the materials and the opportunity; her students become the learners as they inspire each other to understand the content.

“Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling,” Alfred North Whitehead wrote in 1917. “Scraps of information have nothing to do with it.” In teaching, “above all things we must beware of what I will call ‘inert ideas’ - that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations.”

It takes time, repetition, and patience to override prior learning. I’ve been actively working on doing so for the past two years. At first, my efforts to engage students were met with failure, but persistence is beginning to pay off.

With the help of a few friends, I’ve been practicing the student engagement model, exploding inert ideas, and allowing students to become the teachers with the California Chaparral Institute’s new Chaparral Naturalist Program. We have just finished our second session. The students love it. So do I.

The primary lesson learned thus far? It’s inspiring to get off the stage, provide opportunities for students to ditch inert ideas, allow them to create fresh combinations, and to learn as much as the teacher. I’ve learned it is far more effective to allow others to show their brilliance than for me to tell them how to think.

- February 19, 2016

Cited Works

Halsey, V. 2011. *Brilliance by Design*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA. 217 pp. <http://www.vickihalsey.com/books/brilliance-by-design>

Whitehead, A.N. 1917. *The Organisation of Thought, Educational and Scientific*. Williams and Norgate, London. 228 pp. Also available in *The Aims of Education*, The Free Press (1967).