

**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

I've thought a lot about what it means to lecture to undergraduates. One of the reasons I thought a lot about it was that the most inspiring teachers I had as a student were lecturers. And as I become-- Both at Yale and at MIT I taught lecture courses. And I became, I think, good at them. But I was never as good as I wanted to be. And I think maybe one thing that made me a good lecturer was I was always nervous.

And even to this day, I've been lecturing in the film course now I think 38 or 39 years. I still get stage fright. But I'm glad I do it because it makes me live for the students. I hated bad lectures. I thought they were the pits of higher education. And I swore to myself that if I became a lecturer I would never bore my students. That was a worse sin than almost any other a teacher could commit was to be boring.

And I have also felt that, in recent years especially, although it's always been an undercurrent in education, there's been a kind of growing negative feeling about lectures as if they're herding students into our herd experience. And it doesn't give them hands on experience. And I think, intellectually, that's a foolish perspective. Professors no more than students.

It's appropriate for students to listen to professors sometime. Professors should take the responsibility of when they talk to students very seriously. If they can present the information to students in ways that are more effective on paper, or on film, or in some other format, on video disks, or on computer disks they should do so.

But if they take-- And in a small classroom they should certainly encourage discussion and interaction. But I think surely there are times and places, especially in the humanities, when it's perfectly appropriate for a professor who knows an immense amount more than the students to present material that has been synthesized by the years of study and understanding that he or she has.

And the greatest experiences, the most inspiring intellectual experiences I had as an undergraduate in college were from lecturers. And I taught-- I was very fortunate. I went to a wonderful university. Princeton. They had very small classes. I was in some tutorials that, they were called preceptorials, that were seven students and a full professor. So I got the benefits of intense one on one or close to one on one attention. And I loved those classes.

But the classes I had in which they were 100 or 75 or 150 students listening to a Professor of

History, or a Professor of Philosophy, or a Professor of Literature talk in the ways they did about ideas, about the history of ideas, about the power of texts, taught me what literature is and taught me what intellectual engagement with literature should be. And I swore to myself that if I became a teacher I would try to be a good lecturer rather than a bad one.

So it seemed to me as-- First of all, as I thought about the most inspiring lectures that I had as an undergraduate. It was one professor I had especially. He's now dead. But he was a wonderfully inspiring man. Also became an inspiring scholar who didn't produce a lot of work but his scholarship was very productive. And he was a department chair who generated a lot of colleagues work. He was a great man.

His name was Lawrence Holland. His book was called, it was on Henry James, it was called *The Expense of Spirit*. his lecture was on American literature. And a number of us in that course became Professors of Literature. I'm thinking now who I've state in touch with and they're also teaching or still teaching around the country. So Holland affected other students as well as me.

And his strategy in lectures I've tried to copy. Or even plagiarize. One thing he always did was he presented an outline. It was not the text of the lecture. But it was three or four central digestible points that organized the lecture in sequence. He would give out mimeographed sheet to each of his students and you would follow along. And sometimes under each rubric there might be one or two other sub facts to help the student. It didn't capture the whole lecture. But you could use that sheet to organize your understanding of the lecture.

I thought that was a wonderfully helpful. I found it wonderfully helpful. Both for review. But also because what it showed me was that Professor Holland had planned what he was doing. That he was presenting material to me that he had thought long about that he organized in a serious way.

But the second great thing about Larry Holland's lectures was that they were not completely written out. There were parts of them that were written out. Very eloquent moments often at the beginning at the end. And I've sometimes imitated that. But the greatest part of his lectures were his lectures seemed spontaneous. Even though he was following his lecture it seemed as if he was not. He was speaking to me.

And I tried to capture. I've never been as good as he was. Another professor who did this, but

who read his lectures and was theatrically very powerful, taught with me at Yale. And it was Bart Giamatti the man who became the President of Baseball. First the President of the American League and then the Commissioner of Baseball.

And he was a great teacher, too. And a great lecturer. But he wrote most of his out. And he used to practice his readings. And I felt, even though his lectures were great, that they didn't match what Holland did, my undergraduate mentor, because Holland seemed really to be talking to me. And yet when I, as a student, looked at his outline I realized that he'd given me a brilliantly coherent-- That was my ideal.

I'm not sure I actually fully ever realized the ideal. And that may be part of the cost you pay for not writing it out. Because what has happened-- I mean, I always give an outline to my students. And I try to follow the outline. But I also try to leave-- and I also plan and I pick my details. When I'm lecturing in the film course I create clips that I show that I've sort of planned when I want to use the clips. And they interrupt the flow of my discourse.

So this first sequence, it comes from *Cops*. And in many ways I think it embodies that, kind of, a version of the trajectory , or crescendo joke I was talking about earlier. It's a small version of the cannon joke that you see in, or jokes plural, because there's another joke with a cannon in the second half of the film that I've talked about earlier. Let's show it Greg.

And of course this is the moment where Keaton is in flight from the police. The cops are chasing him. He runs up this teeter totter, right? He runs up a ladder it turns out to be like a seesaw.

But when I am at my best I think I'm doing something that can't be captured in printed form. Or couldn't be captured if you gave students a transcript of what you had done. Which is that I'm modeling thinking. I'm modeling how you make connections. I'm even modeling discovery in a certain way. Intellectual discovery.

Because by not actually writing the words out I sometimes bring the material together in a different way. And I do make discoveries while I'm talking. And that energizes me and makes me more powerful.

And I think that was another thing that I got from Larry Holland. I realized that another aspect of what he was showing me was how not just intellectually engaged but how passionately engaged, how emotionally valuable studying literature could be. And I tried in my lectures, not

exactly consciously because I think I absorbed some of this unconscious. Only in recent years that I've thought about it abstractly and I'm able to articulate it.

But I see now that Lawrence Holland was a great-- I had other great lecturers at Princeton. He wasn't the only one. But Holland was the one I remember best and I admire and I sometimes, when I remember to do this in the last lecture of the film course, I pay respects to him. I'm getting sentimental about him. I haven't seen him or talked to him in 30, 40 years.

In a certain sense that what I try to tell the students about what I do for the film courses is this. I want them to watch-- the movie is the primary text. And I see myself, in some sense, as playing the role of a kind of synthesizer or channel, which tries to give a kind of brief but extraordinarily concise account or summary of the best that has been said about this particular film. Or the best that has been said about the historical processes that lead up to the making of the film.

In other words, because I don't expect my students to become film scholars or literary scholars. In my literature courses I have the same ambition. I imagine that the kind of student I want to reach is that of a literate citizen. And I don't expect them to have the kind of knowledge that a scholar what have. I try to play the role of someone who synthesizes aspects of the scholarship for them.

And that's also another reason why the lecture is what is important. Because I could have the students read five scholarly books and synthesize them. But I do that for them so that they have the time to look at the film and think about it seriously.

The environment of the classroom or the lecture room is a unique kind of community. It depends on certain kinds of conventions that everyone accepts. For example. In the lecture students know they're not supposed to raise and interrupt you in the middle of your lecture. And it's only a very aggressive or arrogant student who will do so. A good lecturer will sometimes say, if you have questions I'll make time at the end. Or in my classes what I try to do is say, look. I'm going to give the first 15 minutes of my lecture next week to questions you might have about anything. And I urge you to bring them up.

You need to do that, I think, if you're lecturing. You shouldn't ever-- In my courses, of course, there's also, and I think is critical. I don't believe in courses that are only lecture. Even my course, which has two hours of lecture a week, has one hour of discussion. Recitation. I think it's very important for the students to take possession of the ideas that you talk about.

I think that students in a good class, I think you do create a kind of community of learning. A community of inquiry. It can be especially exciting in a discussion class where you actually talk about-- I try to tell students, you know, this is one of the few places in which you can get angry in a certain way. And passionate in disagreement with someone and not offend them.

And that's the most exciting kind of class when you say, you know, you're completely wrong about that passage. Knowing that the person you're saying that to won't be offended. You're not attacking the person. You're part of the passionate discourse of trying to understand the excitement of trying to understand the text. Trying to understand what's some writer or artist has done.

That can be so enlivening. And it can be truly a deeply communal experience. It doesn't even work if it's not, in some sense, communal. So I think even in a lecture there's a sense of interaction between you and your audience. And if your audience is bored, if your audience is not listening, if they go online and start doing their homework. Right? Or their email. You're a bad teacher and you shouldn't be doing it.

If you're arrogant enough to think that you want the students to pay attention to you for 50 minutes without interruption you better be organized and you better be good. And I think a lot of professors are not. And I think that they dishonor my profession when they do that. I think we shouldn't have lecturers who don't really do their job properly.

But I think lecturers who do, do a uniquely valuable job. They model things for students that they can't get themselves in discussion. They show what real learning can be. And what passionate engagement with learning can also be. And that's the kind of defense I would give of the medium of the live lecture.