

# Confessions of an Ex-Lecturer

By Jonathan Rees

February 21, 2017, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

When this semester started, I spent the first two weeks tracking down students — via email and other methods — so that I could invite them to use the digital tools I've assigned for my online survey course on U.S. history. I could have just sent emails to their university accounts but, in my experience, most students hardly ever check their campus email. Getting the address that they do check was the first step in trying to bring my course to where students live their already-busy digital lives.

Introducing education into their digital lives sometimes requires teaching students how to use new web tools. For example, I've found a messaging app called Slack to be much more effective than any existing learning-management system discussion board. A key reason why: It has a cell phone app that notifies users of messages at the very top of their screens. I certainly don't expect students to respond to class messages instantly, but those notifications serve as a constant reminder: You are part of an online class, and that class requires your eventual participation.

Of course, getting students to load and use Slack and other digital resources requires a fair bit of work. That's why I spend the first two weeks of class helping students set up the tools they'll need for the rest of the semester. So, rather than helping them learn much of anything about American history, I am emailing them about error messages, sending them URLs, and generally troubleshooting their various computer problems, as was the case when I taught this course online for the first time last semester.

I realize this confession may sound crazy to some academics. Heck, it still sounds crazy to me.

When I was an undergraduate, I never had a history course with less than 30 people in it. I spent most of my time taking copious notes as my professors lectured. In graduate school, I was much more enamored with leading discussions in small sections than lecturing in front of large classes. Nevertheless, when I became a professor, I still used an exclusively lecture format for my large survey courses because I never had a different example from which to draw.

The longer I've taught, however, the more doubts I've had about lecturing as an effective educational tool. I've written before [on Vitae](#) about the effect of cell phones on my lecturing practices, but then I started reading [summaries](#) of [some](#) of the [research](#) on the ineffectiveness of lecturing — and had a crisis of confidence.

Lecturing was good enough for me when I was in college, but what if times have changed? Was forcing my students to learn history in the same way I did the best strategy for getting them to care about my discipline as much as I do? How could I bring the kinds of discussions that I enjoyed leading back in graduate school into my survey courses and share the kind of applied history that, until that point, only the students in my upper-level classes really got to experience?

Teaching my U.S. history survey online has allowed me to blow up all of my preconceptions about what that class should be and rebuild it from the ground up.

Instead of focusing on facts, I get a chance to focus the class on discussion and writing. Instead of being the sole arbiter of what's important in history, the students can spend more time interacting with the historical material they most enjoy. While I admit that leading an effective online discussion is much harder than I thought it would be, at least I don't have to spend three hours a week in front of students who would be constantly checking their cell phones even if I was the best lecturer the world has ever seen.

Honestly, I've come to believe that most professors who cling to the lecture format do so because they crave being the center of attention — even when their audience is indifferent or hostile. Faculty get so little respect these days outside the classroom that it seems only natural for us to covet whatever respect we can garner from within it.

Historians seem particularly drawn to lecturing as a way to show off our hard-won expertise and because we just have so many great stories to tell. Unfortunately for us, a lot of what we learned from books is now easily available through the same Internet that distracts our students even while they're supposed to be listening to us tell them what the past was really like.

Helping undergraduates solve computer problems is not what I expected to be doing for a living back when I was in graduate school. Nevertheless, I still think this approach is one of the best uses of my time.

Is all of this a bit, “If you can't beat 'em join 'em?” Maybe, but in reality, I think my teaching now goes one better than that. Instead of capitulating, I'm taking those digital distractions that every professor laments and harnessing them toward a greater purpose — namely, teaching writing and critical thinking. And if students end up learning a few computer skills in their history class, then so much the better.

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