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Locating the university lecture as a contemporary educational practice

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Abstract: The university lecture has attracted much critical evaluation over a long period. Yet it remains resilient in the face of such scepticism. However, the project reported here finds that a sample of experienced lecturers fail to recognise the terms of this critique in their own practice. They uniformly describe contrary approaches. These are characterised in terms of three communication priorities: orchestration, enactment, and dialogue. An emphasis on the dialogic nature of exposition suggested an exploratory intervention in which students collaborated with a peer around a recorded lecture. Transcripts of these sessions indicate the way in which lectures can prompt a ‘conversational’ reaction within their audiences. The overall pattern of findings reported here helps to interpret the resilience of the live lecture. The success of online courses implies that lecturing co-presence is central to the resilience of lecturing in mainstream education. This is interpreted in relation to practitioners’ continued protection of three imperatives within live exposition: community, conviviality and conversation.

Keywords: collaboration; lecturing; university

This paper responds to current scepticism regarding the status of lectures as a key resource in higher education. The terms in my title are chosen to impose some focus on the discussion that follows. First, concern here is narrowed to educational lectures and so does not address such occasions as conference presentations, inaugural speeches, TED talks and similar self-contained expositions. Second, the adjective ‘contemporary’ recognises that there are recent shifts in how an educational lecture is constituted. In particular, new technologies increasingly shape live communication by teachers – often in ways that are responding to trends in educational theory. Finally, lecturing is identified here as a ‘practice’. This serves to acknowledge it’s inevitable embedding within wider eco-systems of teaching and learning. In short, the lecture of concern here is “an expository presentation of disciplinary content, associated with a focal voice, and embedded in a curriculum” (Crook & Schofield, 2017, p. 57).

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Within the research literature of Education, there is a long history of questioning the value of lecturing (e.g., Barnett, 2000; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Bligh, 1971; Laurillard, 2002). The terms in which it is characterised by these critics are sobering. For example, Laurillard, in her “rethinking” of university education, describes lecturing as: “… a very unreliable way of transferring the lecturer’s knowledge to the student’s notes,” suited only to “what is elegant or pleasing” rather than what is “difficult and complex” (p. 94). While Barnett (2000) explains how the lecture “… keeps channels of communication closed, freezes hierarchy between lecturers and students, and removes any responsibility on the student to respond” (p. 159). Another influential commentator (King, 1993) describes the relationship constructed within lecturing in similarly bleak terms: first, there is “(t)he one who has the knowledge and transmits that knowledge to the students” (that is the lecturer). Then there are the students, or those who “(s)imply memorize the information and later reproduce it on an exam – often without even thinking about it.” To confront this unhappy situation, Alison King prescribes an attitude shift based around a simple binary contrast – one that has resonated well with skeptics ever since: the lecturer must cease to be a “sage on the stage” and, instead, aspire to be a “guide on the side” (op cit, p. 30). The project reported below draws upon the voice of currently practicing lecturers – to see if they recognised this sceptical account of their activity.

Scepticism may be deeply rooted. Outside of academic debate and in the vernacular, the very term ‘lecture’ often carries negative connotations (“when I asked for advice, he just gave me a lecture” etc.). Yet despite this apparently suspicious – if not hostile – attitude towards lectures, they do continue to be delivered. Moreover students, while sometimes acknowledging limitations to the format, still welcome that status quo (Hodgson, 1997; O’Neill & Sai, 2014; Petrović & Pale, 2015). This resilience of the lecture is further apparent in the wider public discourse that sometimes addresses educational practices. For example, the phrase “university lectures” is often used interchangeably with “university education”. In the UK, a recent rise in tuition fees encouraged a form of protest wherein students divided their required fees by the number of lectures provided – an alarming arithmetic, as it is based on the belief that lectures were the only resource that mattered in a university education. Newspapers made a similar equation during the Covid-19 pandemic, with outraged headlines such as: “students pay their fees, but their lectures are online”. Again it as if lectures were the principal resource that was being paid for.

One of the most direct challenges to the prominence of the lecture as a teaching method was made by the eighteenth-century lexicographer Samuel Johnson.

Lectures were once useful; but now, when all can read, and books are so numerous, lectures are unnecessary. If your attention fails, and you miss a part of a lecture, it is lost; you cannot go back as you do upon a book … People have nowadays got a strange opinion that
everything should be taught by lectures. Now, I cannot see that lectures can do as much good as reading the books from which the lectures are taken. I know nothing that can be best taught by lectures, except where experiments are to be shown. You may teach chemistry by lectures. You might teach making shoes by lectures! (Boswell, 1791/1998, 1136).

The writer Virgina Wolff, after attending a lecture, makes the same point: “Why, since printing presses have been invented these many centuries, should he not have printed his lecture instead of speaking it?” (Woolf, 1942). This argument feels compelling; particularly now that digital technologies offer great representational richness within those “books” that might be grounding a lecture. The contrast made by both Dr Johnson and Viginia Wolff is one between different expository formats for the same content. They are proposing that the live speech of a lecture is trumped by the versatility of its textual version. Put differently, it is implied that the content of a live lecture could be transcribed to a digital text with no significant loss of value. The credibility of this proposed equivalence is one claim that will be addressed here.

The equivalence argument could be expressed even more strongly. I.e., not only might there be no loss of value in the lecture as a transcription, but value may be gained. Although ‘transcription’ may be better termed ‘media transformation’. The point being that the alternative to the lecture would be available as a study artefact: a material version that is not tethered to a particular time and place – while still associated with an identified author/voice. This free-floating feature of the lecture equivalent is one way in which value might be added. For example, if the transformed artefact is a video (and that could include a live lecture “captured”), then the author/lecturer may usefully exercise creative editing to ‘polish’ the recorded item before releasing it. While the student may usefully exercise a freedom to move backwards and forwards in the resulting record when it is viewed.

All such novel practices should thereby imply a marginalisation of the lecture, but also a marginalisation of the lecturer (perhaps to a “guide on the side”). Indeed such predictions might seem to resonate with the flourishing of entirely online study programmes. For example, successful MOOCs are assumed to challenge the institutional certainties of the familiar classroom – so much so that the co-founder of a major MOOC platform (Coursera) can sound out a “death knell for the lecture” (Koller, 2011). However, celebration of that sort should be read cautiously. Despite networked media, traditional lectures have proved resilient within higher education. Indeed, any death knell prognosis needs to be reconciled with the widespread insertion of ‘video lectures’ within the design of MOOCs. This does imply that there remains significant value associated with the continued deployment of an expository voice. Whether that value requires the voice to be ‘live’ (with audience
co-presence) and whether it needs measured integration with a curriculum are still matters for consideration.

Yet it is the resilience of the lecture that remains such a puzzle. Accordingly, the following research questions are suggested. (1) How do representative university lecturers themselves perceive the nature and form of their current practice? (2) How far does lecturers’ account of practice imply student experiences of the kind expressed by critics? (3) Do the conceptions of lecture practitioners explain the resilience of the university lecture in the face of sustained critical commentary? (4) Does the practitioner account of lecturing undermine Dr Johson’s challenge of ‘text equivalence’. These questions invite conversations across different teaching disciplines. If there are neglected functions of live lecturing that challenge prevailing critiques then they are most likely to be revealed in practitioner reflections. Such analysis is carried out below, but it can only be exploratory. To consider these matters at scale would require considerable sampling resource. However, it is appropriate first to detect themes through working closely with a small and representative sample of practitioners – for this will provide direction for what might be pursued in a larger scale investigation.

1 The lecturers’ voice: participants

In seeking to engage with practitioners’ perspectives on their lecturing, informants should be recruited from a variety of academic disciplines. Fifteen experienced lecturers were approached from within a leading UK university. Two were unable to take part and so findings below are based upon 13 interviews. The academic disciplines represented were as follows: Astrophysics (1), Biosciences (1), Economics (1), Education (1), Engineering (1), Geography (2), Mathematics (1), Medicine (2), Physics (2), Sociology (1). Effort was made to ensure the authenticity of these conversations. The interviewer was himself an experienced lecturer in the same institution. Those approached were not known to have exceptional responsibilities for teaching policy or management. Rather, they were selected from a random sample of individuals who had volunteered that year to start using lecture capture technology. Although that feature of their experience is not addressed in the current report, it was considered helpful in two ways. First, locating the conversation in relation to a relevant institutional innovation added meaning and relevance to questioning about how lecturing was understood. Second, to pursue the (otherwise independent) theme of lecture capture effects, the interviewer had access to full details of course material, including lecture capture records: this ensured that the conversation was grounded in a mutual understanding of the local curriculum and its delivery.
The interview began with an unstructured conversation around the context and conditions of the course(s) under consideration and the extent of the participant’s experience as a teacher. The question that led the interview was “What do you think that lectures are for, and how do you feel they achieve that purpose?” This core question was elaborated in the following ways:

1. These are your own views for answering this question: do such views vary across the different courses or student cohorts that you teach?
2. How far do you feel that your own views reflect that of your institutional colleagues in the discipline?

Answers to these questions were followed up by the interviewer insofar as they helped to clarify the perspectives that were being put forward. This part of the interview would typically last 30 min. The conversation was continued into a consideration of lecture capture and its value (to be reported elsewhere) and some material from that conversation was included in the present analysis if relevant.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed according to the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved open coding of participant contributions from which dominant themes were constructed insofar as they related to the current research questions. Transcribed dialogues were revisited to establish the coherence and integrity of these themes.

Analysis suggested three significant themes within participants’ explanations of what their lectures were for. These themes are termed here: ‘orchestration’, ‘enactment’, and ‘dialogue’. There are relationships between them: relationships that suggest a hierarchical or nested organisation of influence. So, ‘orchestration’ identifies a lecturing role that is overarching; it aims to influence students’ general commitments of time, motivation, and effort. ‘Enactment’ is an expressive practice that inspires interest or renders disciplinary process visible during local episodes of exposition. While ‘dialogue’ occurs as more intimate and transient exchanges between speaker and audience within the lecturing session. In presenting this analysis, an internal structure for each theme will be proposed by recruiting the voices of participants to illustrate meaning. Each such quotation is annotated with a speaker identifier (that includes their disciplinary affiliation): a coding prefix is also attached for ease of in-text reference.
In reviewing these themes it may often seem that favourable features identified for the lecture could be equally applied to its transformation as an artefact – a text or recording. Above, this was termed Dr Johnson’s ‘equivalence challenge’. In the final Discussion Section of this paper it will be suggested that, taken together, analysis here does identify the lecture as a distinctive resource in the design of undergraduate study programs. Lectures may not be a necessary condition of student success, but they are nevertheless a significant resource that needs to be protected and cultivated.

3.1 Orchestration

This theme expresses the lecturer’s commitment to oversee and stimulate an unfolding process of student engagement: launching a student journey, promoting confidence, mapping a space of private study, and enabling sustenance or support. That loose narrative is illustrated in this sub-section by quoting the reflections of our lecturer informants.

Lectures were often discussed in “starting point” terms. Student confidence would be fostered by proposing a clear entry point for those who often might be unfamiliar with a topic and its territory.

A.1: I suspect for most students the lecture is the starting point, their introduction. Certainly on topics that they are going to be assessed on. It’s their way into a topic (L4 Sociology).

Implicit in such reflections was the idea that what is being ‘started on’ is a local curriculum. Namely, a particular disciplinary territory constructed in this place, for us. Inevitably, the lecturer will chart the general landscape of the chosen territory but, in doing so will encourage in a class of students a sense of curriculum ownership. Later lectures would promote a form of ‘traveller confidence’ about the journey whose starting point was now defined. But this would be confidence for a personal and guided journey – not an imposed one.

A2: So there’s a way to introduce them to a problem area and then say: look folks, this is how this has been cut up in the literature, right? And I’m the first guide to you for this body of work …. and then it’s going to be over to you to work out how you want to respond to those prompts (L3 Geography).

A3: The lecture is an opportunity to start to engage. But there’s very much the expectation that they will be doing stuff outside of lectures. (L5 Engineering).

A4: I guide students towards more independent and interactive work: where you know the ‘treasure’ is to be found (L1 Education).
This “over to you” style of message stressed that what was provided in lectures was not only an initial specification for a body of disciplinary knowledge (a “starting point”), lectures would also clarify the student’s responsibility for constructing a personal approach to that knowledge. This was a way of fostering confidence to make that journey as individuals, and to take personal responsibility for finding meaning. In short, the lecture declares the imperative of agency in study.

Yet it would be irresponsible to release students totally unguided on this personal venture. It was often stressed that lectures would aim to stimulate agency by highlighting the external sources and the inquiry strategies that could support a private program of study.

A5: I will have slides with specific references, highlighting to students the importance of these particular items. And that highlighting ties back to a reading list where the items are starred as being important and the core readings that they must look at as a minimum (L10 Geography).

A6: I try really hard – and I know a lot of my colleagues try really hard – to link to further reading or link to an activity that they should do or trying make it embedded within a range of other material (L12 Medicine).

Such strategies were not a rigid prescription of the kind: “do this, and then do this”. What was being strived for in a lecture was an integration of sources – demonstrating a study narrative that recruits them. This could ate a form of coherence within the material being explored by students. Such an effort of cross-referencing thereby seemed less a didactic transmission and more the “orchestration” of a student responsibility.

Yet fostering agency and identifying a study ‘territory’ are teacher investments that deserve to be complemented by sustenance and support. Lectures were a context that was important for the management of motivation.

A7: First of all, in very simple terms lectures help to provide a structure for the student to get out of bed. They come in, they engage, they meet with their colleagues, they can ask me questions on whether they did it [problems] properly … Most of them would put it off, right? Secondly they are in the room and there are, in principle, no distractions. They should be focused entirely on this material. Whereas if they try and do this at home, inevitably they have the phone, a friend, they have some tea – whatever. (L2 Astrophysics).

A8: The [student problem solving] teams’ training sessions are in the lecture. It’s giving them support to work in their teams and it gives them a space to talk to me about any problems. For example if I notice some of them not showing up (L9 Biosciences).

In A7, it is recognised that new and demanding material can require challenging levels of student engagement. The expectation of attendance at lectures creates a
(scheduled) form of study structure supporting that student engagement. Moreover, the comments in both A7 and A8 indicate how the lecture can serve as an occasion for self-monitoring and benchmarking. Because the performance of student peers is made visible, while the lecturer can give feedback as to the quality of that performance – to individuals, or to problem-solving ‘teams’ (A8).

Taken together, the comments above highlight how practitioner reflections invoke the ‘lecture-as-orchestration’ ideal. Yet this is a theme that contrasts with a popular alternative perception of what lectures should achieve. That more traditional view centres on an expectation that lectures should be the crucibles of ‘content’: that they comprehensively specify and circumscribe what must be learned.

A9: One of the comments that I get is ‘well everything she says isn't in the slides’ …. but slides are a prompt. Slides are not a transcript, far from it. They are videos and images and problems and things like that (L5 Engineering).

A10: I have been quite surprised at how much they are attempting to pass assessments based upon attending the lectures … I also know some of them either use the PowerPoint only or the lecture capture as a replacement for the textbook. Because they don’t want to read the textbook … they do use it for revision. But that always worries me as well because I think revision is to look back at something already studied rather than to engage with it for the first time. (L1 Education).

The comment A9 refers to an expectation among students that the expected outcome of study is an echoing of what will be thoroughly articulated in lectures. Student surprise can then follow when material supposed as being relevant is excluded from, for instance, the design of lecture slides. Yet, from the lecturer’s perspective in A10, such slides are typically a resource for prompting reflection on the construction of content – not its delivery. The same concern about lectures is extended in A10 to include unwelcome perceptions of the class textbook. This is interesting because it reminds us that lectures – and their potential textbook replacements – face a similar challenge: namely managing students’ expectations about their responsibility for active inquiry in learning. On this conception of instruction, any circumscribed artefact (a lecture, a video, or a text) should not be approached as prescribed content. What is offered is a resource to support the student’s own effort of knowledge building – not a replacement for that.

This final point about ‘orchestration’ is important. Because it expresses an empowering model of the lecture, rather than a model based on content ‘delivery’. Petersen et al. (2020) argue that, unfortunately, lecturing has become driven too much by the felt need to deliver content. They summarise several studies in which lecturers are bemoaning this “tyranny of content”. It is suggested that developing a lecture course in these terms has been a by-product of increasingly bloated course text books. These books endeavour to offer comprehensive, official, and definitive
versions of subject content. Lecturers may therefore risk reproducing this tyranny in their own presentations – perhaps at the expense of empowering the students’ exploration of a syllabus. The American Association for the Advancement of Science is one professional community that has encouraged a less content driven and more student-centred approach to teaching (AAAS, 2011). The orchestral perspective on lecturing can help achieve this goal.

Even if some lecturers are approaching their craft in narrow content delivery terms, this cannot justify the wholesale dismissal of the lecture form. But noticing such individuals may alert us to how easily lecturing can be subject to a transformation that may render its easy substitution with an equivalent expository text. The rise of certain digital technologies may influence practice in that respect. However, such technology can be mobilised in opposing directions: either for content delivery or for the cultivation of student agency. For example, the network course management system (or VLE) can readily be nothing more than a repository for content. But it can also be a space in which student collaboration and knowledge construction is organised. Similarly, the “capture”, or recording, of lectures is another technology whose use is open-ended. Perhaps for that reason, our informants here often referred to lecture capture with a degree of unease. It could be a real support to study; but it could also be a force that undermined depth of disciplinary engagement. For example, lecture capture is a resource that often seemed to encourage a pre-assessment, knowledge-cramming strategy.

A11: Binge studying [prior to examination]: that’s how a lot of students consume content outside of work – Netflix. And while that might be great from an entertainment perspective, that’s not necessarily very good from a learning perspective (L5 Engineering).

Orchestration has been discussed here as the ‘first’ theme because it’s contribution occurs at a more macro-communitive level. The theme illustrates how lectures can give structure to the students’ experience, through exposition that stresses source integration, cross-referencing, synthesis, and the building of coherence. Orchestration thereby maps pathways that students might then explore in their private study. These are features that identify the lecture as an educational practice. To invoke the vocabulary of ‘practice’ is to recognise how lectures are embedded in institutionally designed curriculum structures and resources. Certainly a lecture can be an event that stands alone (e.g., the “guest” or “invited” lecture), but the university lecture as discussed by informants here is an exposition that is both integrated by, and integrated within, a space of sources and supports. Later (in the General Discussion) it will be acknowledged that some of what lectures achieve this way may also be achieved within the design of text-based study material. But such orchestration of study nevertheless remains a resource particularly well
realised through the distinctive features of the university lecture program. Although the basis for a strength in that format depends on other features of the lecturing practice: features to be discussed in the following sections.

3.2 Enactment

Some perspectives discussed by informants referred to the expressive demands of exposition. A lecturer may aim to ‘enact’ the discipline, rather than simply transmit its content. Informants from the humanities and social sciences would often discuss this in terms of their inspirational role. However, this was not simply a matter of recasting the lecture as performance (They seemed to heed Goffman’s warning: “… listeners are to be carried away so that time slips by, but because of the speaker’s subject matter, not his antics” (Goffman, 1981, p. 166)). Nevertheless, achieving inspiration was seen as a critical moment in establishing students’ engagement with subject matter.

B1: The lecture is to inspire them to want to do it. So it’s to give them an idea of why this is interesting … the lecture is the point where you either engage the student or you don’t. Whether you get them to think ‘this is a week [topic] I’m interested in’ (L4 Sociology).

Some comments expressed this role of lecturing very strongly. Often making explicit the responsibility to inspire being dominant over the responsibility to assemble and present definitive subject content.

B2: I don’t care about content; I care about them being inspired I guess. So, I hope they look at things in a different way. I hope they find it an anchoring experience … the other side that I think is important is having someone who is interested in what they’re doing. And I make that a lot in my comments. So, “the lecture is fun because she cares about it” – that comes up a lot. (L9 Biosciences).

While striving to inspire need not require Goffman’s lecture “antics”, success could still be underpinned by qualities of individual personality or attitude. Whatever their psychological origins, their impact might be conveyed through qualities of commitment or disciplinary enthusiasm that were apparent in the lecturer’s manner. So in B2, the lecturer reflects on the responsibility to communicate her “she cares about it” attitude. While in B3, student engagement is associated with the lecturer’s manifest expertise.

B3: My own feedback from students is that they value the opportunity to listen to somebody who knows what they’re talking about – trying to make it interesting and exciting and valuable for them. (L1 Education).

In summary, success with inspiration was supposed to depend on enacting some form of personal ‘presence’. This relates to one of our research questions: namely,
that such achievements are distinctive to live exposition and not easily realised in the textual equivalence of a lecture. Such a position is expressed in comment B4.

B4: It’s so basic really, but engaging an audience, trying to make something interesting that captivates to a certain extent the imagination. It’s over and above that which can be achieved simply by reading about it (L10 Geography).

Within the science and engineering community, a strategy of enactment was also sometimes expressed in this language of inspiration. But it was more often referred to in terms of the lecturer’s conscious ‘thinking aloud’. To build knowledge in these disciplines students were understood to be problem solvers. Both in class and out of class they would be expected to become confident with problems, engagement with which provided the route towards deep knowledge in the discipline. To that end, informants would explain how they acted to make disciplinary reasoning visible.

B5: What I’m actually doing is explaining the thought process needed to go through a problem … Lectures are about me explaining why I’m doing certain things when I’m not doing other things. (L4 Maths).

B6: Some fraction of the lecture content is actually working through problems. So it’s not necessarily just getting the answer at the end, it’s the process of getting there … trying to talk through how I myself would think through doing the calculation. (L6 Physics).

Again, this process of ‘reasoning aloud’ seemed not something so easily replicated within the resource of a traditional text: more an experience linked to the dynamic of a live encounter between expert and novice:

B7: It’s a means of going through line by line how you work through these derivations and what the purpose of it is – in the grand scheme of applied economics … But somehow I think you’ve got to have that explanation process. In a way that just sending someone off to a book … well, you lose the dynamic don’t you? Of explaining it to somebody. Getting instant feedback on whether they understand it. Asking for clarification (L7 Economics).

In their discussion of enacting a topic, science and engineering informants often referred to the advantage offered by surface projection technologies. Calculations and symbolic representations could be rendered visually dynamic and readily integrated with spoken commentary. The presentation of static visual images offers similar opportunities – most familiar through such tools as PowerPoint. Yet practices centred on using that technology have been widely criticised (Adams, 2006; Gabriel, 2008; Kernbach, Bresciani, & Eppler, 2015; Nunberg, 1999). The force of these critiques centres on how the technology can encourage a mechanical and relentlessly linear form of presentation – a style that Mann and Robinson (2009) report is strongly linked to student reports of lecture boredom. Forms of
visual support may offer a resource for enacting a discipline, but their use requires some sensitivity and skill. In a study of 16 lecturers (in different institutions) teaching the same topic, Hallewell and Lackovic (2017) find a very conservative approach in lecturers’ use of the medium. Slides were dominated by text and, particularly, by bullet points. Few slides presented photographic material – images that might be expected to bring visual life to enactment.

Compelling visual material is not a resource unique to the lecture: traditional text books can also recruit such material. Presentation technology in the lecture room therefore relates to our consideration of Dr Johnson’s text/lecture equivalence challenge. Moreover, rules for effective use apply equally to both of these expository forms – and may be equally vulnerable to careless use. Whether a visual presentation is fully effective in either text or lecture will depend on how skilfully the visual image is integrated with the interpretative voice of the author/speaker (Stull, Fiorella, & Mayer, 2020). However, Hallewell and Crook (2020) provide evidence that lecturers are often very careless in how they approach such integration. Such that students may miss the narrative force of a visual representation. Moreover, the evidence from recorded lectures equally implies that such integration is particularly demanding when lecturers record video presentations (Crook & Schofield, 2017). In short, this is an important skill for a lecturer to exercise whatever the medium of exposition. Because the vivid coordination of speech/text and image provides a potentially rich semiotic structure for knowledge building by engaged students (Hwang & Roth, 2011).

As discussed here, enacting a discipline implies a lecturer’s actions sensitively tuned to attentional cues from a classroom audience. In this way students can become drawn into something precious: namely, a ‘conversation’ that centres on the processes of thinking illustrated through some enactment. In a large class it could be argued that individual students will have slim chances of being part of that conversation. However, this need not be the case: because the conversation could be implicit and yet still participatory. The lecturer might achieve such a sense of student participation through adopting a mode of discourse that recruited conversational moves – such as open questioning or the active anticipation of possible responses – while not expecting those responses to be manifest publicly. The exercise of such a version of dialogue is the final of the three themes extracted from analysis of lecturer perspectives and it will be considered next.

3.3 Dialogue

Much scepticism about lecturing supposes that a lecture is a monologue and that, often, the monologue will be boring. Virginia Woolf (1942) comments: “Now the human voice is an instrument of varied power; it can enchant and it can soothe; it
can rage and it can despair; but when it lectures it almost always bores”. Of course, individual lecturers cannot be confident that they escape this danger, but the comments of informants here indicate that they typically do act to avoid it. At the very least there is a sensitivity regarding audience.

C1: You can judge when you’ve lost the audience, or you’re losing the audience. And then re-engage (L4 Sociology).

C2: There’s always a lot of [audience] backchannel. There’s a mumble, or a hush. There’s a quiet choir in front of you that are responding not with voice but with all sorts of, you know, actions (L1 Education).

This second informant went on to note “… so I find it difficult to record an online session by myself, even if it’s exactly the same content” – thereby identifying the inhibiting effect of no audience when privately recording a lecture for circulation. Active awareness of an audience is the starting point for conceiving of a lecture as a participatory event. Lecturers readily do things that highlight and shape the possibility of such participation.

C3: I ask them to read a paper a Journal paper in advance of the session so that they would discuss it in small groups within the session. (L11 Medicine).

Such preparatory investment would form the catalyst for discussion within a lecture. But discussion can also be grounded in challenges that are set up during a lecture.

C4: And it would be incredibly rare for me to talk for more than 10 min without having some kind of other activity going on. Be it an interactive game, or an exercise, or and “ask your friend what they think”, or “pretend to be a neural network” etc. (L1 Education).

However, a lecturer can approach the goal of stimulating participation with more subtle forms of invitation. It may be achieved by prompting students to carry out private mental work in response to in-class prompting by the lecturer.

C5: You ask a question [in a live lecture] and you say: “come on, let’s just think about”. Whereas if you see it [the recorded lecture] on the screen you’re not starting to think about it. Not when you’re watching a computer (L8 Physics).

C6: Before I give lots of definitions of stuff, I often invite students to engage in an imaginative act of definition. So, I tend to have a fairly common loose opening – which tries to get them to imagine what I’m going to be talking about (L1 Education).

What is striking within observations such as C6 is the idea that lecturing can prompt an implicit dialogue with the students present. That is, a dialogue where no
public response is assumed. Theories of learning certainly celebrate a striving for dialogue. But this should not imply dismissal of monologue in teaching (Kvernbekk, 2012). Because, it is argued, the uninterrupted speech of a lecture can acquire a dialogic quality. Given King’s (1993) theatre imagery of “sage on the stage”, it is interesting that a distinguished playwright should recognise the possibility of implicit dialogue within professional exposition. David Hare comments: “Lectures and plays are alike in relying for their true vitality on the richness of the interaction between the performance itself and the thoughts and feelings created by the unspoken reaction in the room” (Hare, 2005, p. 5).

The actor/lecturer is able to animate that “unspoken reaction in the room” through exercising a human capacity for intersubjectivity. That intersubjectivity makes possible an implicit conversation between speaker and (otherwise silent) audience. Intersubjective processes manage the mutual understanding that can exist between people in relation to their individual psychological states. To put it simply, in a situation of you and me sharing some activity, deploying intersubjectivity resources you to understand my thinking at a given moment: but it can also allow me to understand that you have this knowledge. Such hall-of-mirrors mutuality is fundamental to human sociality (Tomasello, 2009), because it can be recruited to support the regulation of our common purposes. This approach to communication is well developed in the work of Bakhtin (1979/2010) and Lotman (1988).

To understand the possibility of dialogue within expository talk, a distinction made by digital game designers may help: namely, immersion versus engagement (Douglas & Hargadon, 2000). Someone ‘immersed’ in an activity (text, movie, game, lecture etc.) is seamlessly carried forward by the force and direction of its narrative. Alternatively, the same media can also ‘engage’ us. It does this “by challenging and subverting our schemas, reminding us of our role as readers and sensemakers” (op. cit. 155). That “role” is one of accepting dialogic invitations to interact with a text – through exercising a cognitive effort of, for example, replying, anticipating, extrapolating, generalising, interpreting, and so on. Such invitations are conveyed by the ‘voice’ of the text, although the ‘engagement’ of the responding audience – the “cognitive effort – is a private, reflective one.

The question therefore arises of how lecturers might talk and act to cultivate this (hidden) conversation that characterises conditions of engagement. This would suggest considering the rhetoric of lecture talk. There have been linguistic analyses of lecturing (Bernad-Mechó, 2017; Mauranen, 2009), although rarely in relation to lecturers strategically managing implicit conversation with their audience. However, Auria (2006) has reported metadiscourse patterns identified from within a large corpus of lecturing. The analysis shows speakers’ awareness of their audience and social identity: “… stylistically, metadiscourse patterning has proved to resemble the style of conversation” (p. 81). Such observations confirm that lecturing talk is often dialogic in a way that invites conversational reactions
from those listening. However, there are no complementary observations that reveal the nature of responses to such invitations within a student audience. Such a hidden relationship would seem hard to investigate. However, this is approached in the next section. An intervention is described there in which student peers view a recorded lecture during which they are encouraged to make public their listener reactions through collaborating talk.

4 The student’s voice: method

Friendship pairs of students were recruited through advertising in student union premises. Volunteers viewed a recorded lecture together, chosen from one of their courses. Each viewed the same recording at the same time, online from their separate domestic spaces. Either student was free to stop or rewind the lecture recording at any point and initiate a conversation with their peer. This was presented to them as an opportunity for online collaborative learning (during the social distancing of a pandemic). The entire exchange was recorded for analysis of the talk prompted during elective pauses in viewing. Figure 1 shows a screen shot of the students’ screen view in a typical session. One slide from the lecture is being observed by two students. The recording controls are beneath that slide, and video windows of the two collaborating students are shown at bottom right (in some sessions, a video of the lecturer was also visible to the right of the slide window).

Figure 1: The video capture collaboration screen display: current slide, video control, and (lower right) participant frames.
5 The student’s voice: findings

Students were taking the degree courses shown in column 1 of Table 1. The first three pairs took part in two sessions (labelled (1) and (2)) a week apart. Sessions lasted until the students wished to terminate. The middle column in this Table indicates for each pair the number of recording pauses for talking, while the rightmost column indicates the percentage of the total session time taken up with the students’ own discussion – as opposed to the lecturers’ presentation.

Recordings were transcribed; each discussion break in a viewing was analysed in terms of the students’ reaction to what had just been viewed. A discussion topic that was introduced by a student in this way is referred to here as an “opener”. In the context of the present report, concern is with classifying the kind of conversational reactions (or openers) that a lecture can elicit. A clearer understanding of the connections made in this way may support lecturers in more confident prompting of student reflection.

Although the number of lecture interruptions per session varied quite widely, all collaborating pairs appeared at ease with the technology and procedure – confirming this afterwards in a debriefing conversation. Totalling the central column in Table 1 will indicate that 71 discussion openers were considered. Table 2 indicates the range of themes that were used to start their discussions. Although these themes arose within a collaboration between student peers, they can be considered as forms of possible private response as those might be aroused within traditional lecture attendance.

The “summarise” theme might serve to solicit confirmation of understanding from the collaborating peer; while during traditional lecture attendance, such summarising could be incorporated in a student’s personal lecture notes. “Evaluate”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Number of discussions per session</th>
<th>% session time partners engaged in own discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English (1)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English (2)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Science (1)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Science (2)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry (1)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry (2)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
describes discussion openers that judge the strength, weakness, or clarity of what has been said. In a collaboration these may lead on to critical exchange among partners, while in the privacy of a lecture they may consolidate thoughts or be written as notes for later consideration. “Interrogation” involves a more investigative relationship with what is being said. This is a deeper form of engagement, and one which allows a student to construct personal understandings from tensions detected in the lecture exposition. Finally, “extrapolation” can be a particularly rich form of reaction to the exposition. It describes a reflective process wherein the listener extends the meaning of what has been presented, either through some form of hypothesis generation (“would this work if …”) or through making a connection to some other experience or knowledge that the student has already in place. In the discussions here this connection was either to other material from lecture presentations or to private study episodes, or to some feature of practical experience – such as lab work or placement experiences (“this is what happened when …”).

6 The student voice: discussion of findings

Discussion “openers” were the focus of analysis here because they identify the range of ways in which a moment of listener reflection can be prompted by the lecture. How that reflection period develops beyond an opener is of interest but would require a fuller analysis. For present purposes, attention is focussed on how student audiences find their ‘turn’ opportunities in the potential conversation afforded by the lecturer’s implicit dialogue moves. The research strategy here supposes that there is some predictive relationship between the thinking that is made public in students’ collaborative talk and the thinking that might occur

Table 2: Categorisation of the discussion themes initiated in lecture playback pauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opener category</th>
<th>Example discussion opener</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summarise</td>
<td>What do you think the main points were there …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think what she means here is …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>He explains it so explicitly …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I do think she ought to cover [X] at this point …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think that was a pretty cool point …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogate</td>
<td>Exactly why are they doing research like that ….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surely, if you do [X] then you get …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t agree with that at all …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrapolate</td>
<td>Would this work if you …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That is what happened when I …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That came up in an example last week …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
privately when listening in a traditional audience. However, this equivalence is an untested presumption. Nevertheless, documenting the interjections that students do make when collaborating can be a helpful indication of the extent to which a lecture achieves this reciprocity. But also an indication of the likely content of such student interjections – that is, the specifics of cognitive and affective reaction that can be prompted.

In relation to the extent of prompted conversation, the data suggest that this might sometimes be quite limited in a traditional lecture. Perhaps it is a challenge to be highlighted for students when given them advice. For example, the collaborating pair from medicine, found only a single occasion for reacting to what was being said – even though the lectures chosen were ones the students identified as important to review. However, when student interjections did occur, those openers offer insight into how they might be resourcing the student towards building new understandings. They might often reflect the kind of “self-explaining” strategies shown to be potent in other contexts where students are engaging with expository material (Chi, 2000; Chi & Wylie, 2014). The openers described above as “interrogation” and “extrapolation” would seem to lead to the kind of self-explaining that have been shown to enrich understanding by allowing students to generate or reconstruct their own mental models of content (Hausmann & VanLehn, 2007).

7 General discussion

This report has considered the status of the university lecture by inviting practitioner informants to reflect on their practice. One significant theme arising in their comments concerned a commitment to audience dialogue. Therefore a small follow-up study considered how students might typically interact with the lecturing voice as active listeners; the study observed such interactions mirrored through the device of inviting student peers to review collaboratively a recorded lecture. In the light of the various findings described within the two interventions outlined above, this final discussion section will re-visit the four research questions raised at the outset.

(1) How do representative university lecturers themselves perceive the nature and form of their current practice? Responses suggested their perspectives drew upon three themes. The first, “orchestration”, described a felt practitioner responsibility to provide students with an entry point to their subject: then to sustain their motivation and interest in taking ownership of knowledge-building within that subject. This is a perspective more student-centred than content-centred. I.e., it stresses the lecturer’s duty to cultivate agency in
the student’s approach to study. Indirectly, it confronts a danger expressed elsewhere by lecturers (MacKay, 2019), namely that the lecture risks being “canonised” by students; that is, elevated by them to become the sole and comprehensive source of material to be studied. This would be at the expense of students’ independent efforts of inquiry. Instead, it was suggested that this orchestrating role communicates to students an understanding that the curriculum to be studied is local: created in a shared institutional context and thereby establishing students’ ownership of that curriculum. A second theme derived from informants’ comments concerned their pursuit of “expressive” communication modes. This refers to more personal or even idiosyncratic features of exposition: features allowing the individual to present a discipline in ways that might inspire students, or that enacted for them the lecturer’s own thinking processes as discipline problems were tackled. Finally, the lecture was seen as a context for dialogue. Participants described their effort to incorporate dialogue into exposition. This involved an awareness of audience and the presentation of problems that needed to be collaboratively addressed during sessions. It was suggested here that this could also involve the cultivation of implicit dialogue or ‘private’ conversation. This idea was rarely made explicit by informants but their reference to relationships with audience implied it was an active consideration.

(2) How far does lecturers’ account of their practices imply student experiences of the kind expressed by critics? It was hard to recognise in these informants’ comments the kind of attitudes or practices that have been described in much-quoted criticisms of the university lecture. Informants here actively denied “transferring the lecturer’s knowledge to the student’s notes” nor did they seem to “keep channels of communication closed” or “remove any responsibility on the student to respond”. Many critics fail to acknowledge the lecture in practice terms: that is, to recognise that it is an occasion purposefully integrated with other student activities or resources that are to be encountered at other times and in other places. A course lecture is not an isolated event. Critique rarely acknowledges its orchestrating role, persisting instead with the belief that “content tyranny” dominates lecturing. In reality, lecturers here were keen to reject such a “banking model” (Freire, 1970) of their work. Of course, generalisations about contemporary lecturing practice need to be made with care. Our sample is small and there is a risk that informants may express views that they suppose conform to professional expectations. The present researcher can only assert that the generalisations made here are drawn from what was declared in conversations, but also that those comments reflected the spirit and attitude projected by informants at the time.
Do the conceptions of lecture practitioners explain the resilience of the university lecture in the face of sustained critical commentary? The ‘resilient-despite-criticism’ paradox is best resolved by reference to comments above relating to research question (2). The lecture persists because students, lecturers and institutional managers are cultivating in their practices a different form of communication than that which is typically characterised in critical commentary. Of course, critiques are still sometimes justified. Lecturers surely exist who do “keep channels of communication closed” or who act in other ways that imply a dubious didactic and transmissive approach. Yet even while such limitations may exist, the lecture may still be where the student recognises that a curriculum is being offered for their ownership, and that the lecture may continue to be the anchor point for engagement with that curriculum.

Does the practitioner account of lecturing undermine Dr Johnson’s challenge of ‘text equivalence’? Dr Johnson questioned the point of a lecture when students could refer to the books upon which the lecture was based. Similarly, Virginia Wolff asks – “why not write it down and let me read it?” The text equivalence challenge feels stronger today because the equivalent text can be a very rich media source. This would even meet Johnson’s reservation that lectures did remain useful for demonstrations (chemistry etc.). Such a reservation would now seem irrelevant because demonstrations may be achieved online through video material. The growth of online degree programs indicates that live (co-present) lectures are not a necessary condition of successful student outcomes. However, the resilience of that live lecture format reminds us that their remains something potent about it, perhaps something that is especially important for less engaged or less confident students. The present research question might then be better re-framed as: “How can online material seeking equivalence with the lecture be designed so as to reproduce the features underpinning the resilience of the live lecture?” Yet answering that question must keep in mind the fact that lectures can – and often are – incorporated into online courses as video material. Therefore, in the end it would seem to be co-presence that is at the heart of a resilient tradition of lecture-based education. It is this that is particularly important to understand. In the remainder of this Section consideration will be given to three conditions of co-presence in lecturing courses that seem significant to the achievement of resilience: community, conviviality, and conversation.

Community. Part of what is entailed in claiming traditional lecturing as a “practice” is its stable structure of place, time, and social exchange. This imposes an orderly shape to the student’s investment in study. Lectures exist as episodes in a
sequenced ritual of co-presence (Although lecture capture regimes risk a disruption of this sequential and measured organisation for study). The co-presence imposed by lecture attendance may offer some of the reassuring social ambience that students report as valuable in library spaces (Crook & Mitchell, 2012). In their discussions with undergraduate students, Gysbers, Johnston, Hancock, and Denyer (2011) report how students see live lectures as “an integral part of the contemporary university community” (p. 35) and how there is “an inspiration provided by being part of a community of learners in a scholarly environment” (p. 27). Indeed one of our own lecturing informants reflected: “… what I always took away and what I remember as an undergraduate is the social dimension: the coming together of, usually, a large group of people … ‘community’ is absolutely crucial”. Marin (2020) identifies this lecture-mediated community as a basis for “collective imagination”: “Something became present to the students via imagination and this presence of the thing spoken about made students into a ‘we’”. It is therefore unsurprising that designers of online programs strive to reproduce the sense of community otherwise associated with co-presence (Murdock & Williams, 2011).

Conviviality. Much of what was said here by informants implied their effort towards intersubjectivity – striving to acquire a mutuality of understanding with an audience. This suggests the adoption of a convivial manner. Although while individual lecturers may communicate this in their live sessions, they do not easily express conviviality when writing text-based content (such as that required on course management systems (Crook & Cluley, 2009)). Yet Mayer, Fennell, Farmer, and Campbell (2004) have reported on how a personal style of text within multimedia learning materials leads to those materials being more effective. The importance of projecting this dimension of personality resonates with a long tradition of classroom-based research in schools that establishes the significance of instructor “immediacy” (Mehrabian, 1971). Studies have identified a range of teacher activities in the traditional classroom that can contribute to this (Park et al., 2009) and have documented its effects on learner engagement (Ghamdi et al., 2016). In relation to online courses, Richardson et al. (2015) stress how course videos with a live feel can help invoke a sense of ‘instructor presence’.

Conversation. The conviviality achieved through human “presence” will ground the creation of that conversational experience intended to engage lecture-listening students. Buber (1998) has argued that full presence is required as a starting point for dialogue, while Black (2005) develops how this applies to the lecture hall. However, any invitation to converse requires from students the kind of “active listening” originally defined by Dewey (1938). Waks (2011) describes this as “transactional listening-in-conversation” as opposed to “straight line listening”. Yet cultivating a “conversational attitude” is a responsibility for speakers – as much as it is for
listeners. Communicating presence is a start. To drive dialogue forward it was highlighted above how lecturers can recruit metadiscursive strategies in their talk. The engagement of students in such “hidden” or implicit conversations may depend on creating suitable “cognitive prompts”. For example, expressing lecture content through “desirable difficulties” or “uncertain instruction” (Bjork & Bjork, 2020; Lammina & Chase, 2021) can potentially prompt such dialogue. Broadly, these are strategies whereby certain ideas presented are left suspended for listeners to do their own work of completion – through personal theorising, recalling, predicting etc. This is an expository technique whose importance has been demonstrated for the rhetoric of text books (McNamara et al., 1996) and so would seem appropriate to conversational strategies during the live lecture.

The perspectives on the lecture that have been developed in this paper hopefully suggest ways in which each practitioner might reflect on their own communication in this arena. A recurrent theme has been the striving towards a reciprocity between lecturer and student. However, the observations above of collaborating peers reviewing a recorded lecture suggest that students may often need direction and support in achieving high levels of receptivity as listeners. Yet that intervention suggests one practical way of providing a stimulus towards that goal. Our student participants reported that they had never before viewed a lecture recording collaboratively but, also, that they found it very worthwhile – and easy to do online. Encouraging such collaborative reviewing practices is one way to practice an interactive relationship with the lecturing voice. Moreover, Chi et al., (2017) have illustrated how merely watching videos of students in such learning dialogues can be resource for those students watching – i.e., those who merely witness dialogue. Making visible to both students and lecturers the conversational relationship hidden in students’ lecture engagement could define a promising resource. It could help model active listening for students and model effective dialogue moves for lecturers.

References


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