

Why are academic lectures

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By David Pilling | Feb 27, 2020 | Education

Yesterday, I spent six

hours pre-recording a puny little lecture of 15 minutes for the postgraduate “Literacies” unit I’m teaching this term. The unit has gone fully online this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic and I have been planning for interactive delivery in a variety of formats.

One element in the overall mix is a podcast series. I’ve taught the unit a couple of times already so have the content down pat and figured all I needed to do was sit down and deliver my lecture into a microphone. It did not turn out to be a smooth experience.



The content I was covering yesterday – features of written vs spoken language – usually takes about 40 minutes of class time to deliver. That includes asking questions, taking student responses, and summarizing those responses. A standard teacher question-student response-teacher feedback cycle.

Without dialogue, the lecture shrunk to not much more than a third of the time it would normally take but producing it blew out by about nine times.

Most of this production time is a one-off, as I needed to learn how to use Adobe Audition and spent a lot of time designing an *intro* and an *outro*, and figuring out how to overlay them with a signature tune (I chose a few bars of Vivaldi’s Spring Concerto :-). Including a signature tune is a playful option that is obviously not strictly necessary but was fun to learn.

Quite a bit of time also went to editing in order to smooth out bloopers.

Hot tip: If you are unhappy with anything you’ve recorded, don’t stop recording. Instead, pause, click your tongue three times, and repeat whatever went wrong. This way you can easily identify the bits you’ll need to cut in your voice editor.

I may have smoothed out major bloopers but the final product still doesn’t please me and doesn’t meet my usual standards of work. I’m dissatisfied with recurring disfluencies, with too much detail in some parts and not enough in others, a joke that I started and then trailed off because it seemed silly delivering it to the unmoved microphone.

Seeing how much time I invested, I’m wondering where did I go wrong?

Maybe it’s not me at all but the problem is the genre of the academic lecture?

What’s wrong with lectures?

Lectures are odd creatures at the intersection of reading and writing, as a quick look at the table listing the key differences between written and spoken language will show.

Written language	Spoken language
Visual	Oral
Technologically mediated	Embodied
Distant interactants (across time and space)	Co-present interactants
Decontextualized	Contextualized
Durable	Ephemeral
Scannable	Only linearly accessible
Planned/highly structured	Spontaneous/loosely structured

Syntactically complex	Syntactically simple
Formal	Informal
Abstract	Concrete
Monologue	Dialogue

The academic lecture, including in its pre-recorded version, is obviously a form of spoken language. However, most of its characteristics are typically associated not with spoken but with written language:

- The lecture is technologically mediated (recording device at my end, audio player at yours).
- Speaker and audience are distant across time and space (I recorded the lecture yesterday in my home and students will listen to it at other times and places).
- In terms of context, the lecture sits somewhere in the middle between high and low context (it's part of a unit taught in the Applied Linguistics program at Macquarie University but it could be taught in any Applied Linguistics program in an English-medium program).
- The recording is durable and not as fleeting as the spoken word usually is.
- The lecture is not quite as scannable as a written text but you can certainly stop and rewind if there is something you didn't understand, or jump ahead if you get bored.
- The lecture is planned and tightly structured.
- In terms of syntactic complexity and formality, I was aiming for a simple and casual style – the desired “conversational tone” of a podcast. However, on listening back, I discovered that I used a garden path sentence to exemplify one, and I also used words such as “therefore” and “thus” – clear traces of written language.
- I don't even need to mention that the content of the lecture is relatively abstract (“Features of written language”) and that I delivered a monologue.

These mismatched criteria produce a “damned if you do, damned if you don't” genre. For instance, I did not write up the lecture beforehand and so did not read out a script. In face-to-face teaching, I don't need one and for pre-recordings the general advice seems to be that a script will make the lecture sound unnatural. Even so, I'm now I'm beating myself up for uneven delivery – there are a few unfinished thoughts and dysfluencies.

How did such an awkward genre become the main mode of university teaching?



Miniature drawing of a medieval lecture (Image credit: British Library)

The academic lecture has its origins in the European Middle Ages, when both literacy – the ability to read and write – and books were scarce. In a world where writing is cheap and literacy is almost universal, it is hard to imagine just how scarce they were back then. Only the most valuable information was committed to writing. Hand-written manuscripts took years to produce and books were a rare and extremely valuable commodity. Online courses, textbooks, even notebooks were still far in the future.

To teach the valuable information committed to manuscripts, early university

education therefore consisted of a “lecturer” reading to an audience. A lecturer is literally a “reader”, a title still used in UK academia today for what is an Associate Professor in the Australian and US systems. [The lecturer read the set text out loud](#), sometimes providing running commentary or explanations as they went along.

That explains why the lecture is such an odd cross-over genre between written and spoken language. It's a written text read out loud.

What it doesn't explain is why we are reverting to this mode of teaching as we transition from face-to-face to online teaching. The best explanation I can come up with is that technical affordances of the digital world have changed both written and spoken language in fundamental ways, and we are all still working out how to harness them best for learning.

What do you think about pre-recorded lectures? And what are your most and least favorite teaching genres? Have they changed between face-to-face and online?

As for me, I'll try and mix genres as much as possible. Even if they make me cringe, I'll keep podcasts in the mix for now, mainly because I want my students to experience another form of writing to learn: note taking. To

commit something to memory and process it deeply, writing continues to be the medium of choice.

“To reach the mind, knowledge has to flow through the hand,” as one of my lecturers in teacher training kept insisting.

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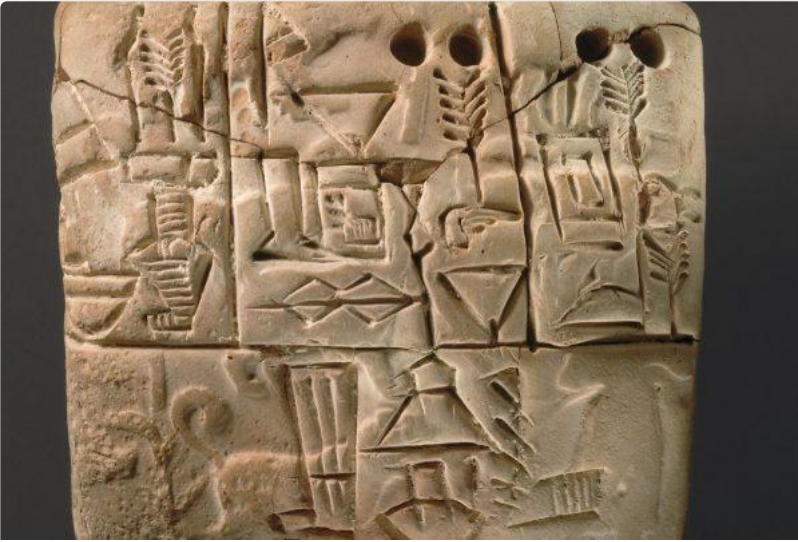


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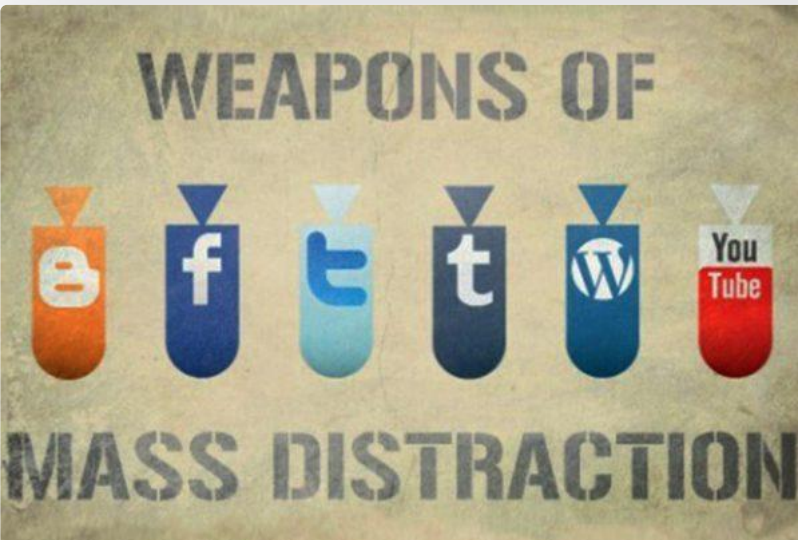


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