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Teaching College: The Ultimate Guide to Lecturing, Presenting, and Engaging Students

Norman Eng
CUNY City College

TEACHING COLLEGE

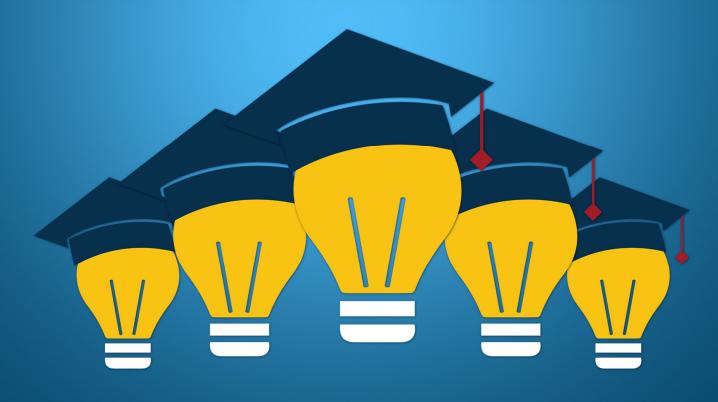## THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO LECTURING, PRESENTING, AND ENGAGING STUDENTS

NORMAN ENG, ED.D.

"Norman Eng writes as if he has been teaching his whole life. This fresh voice talks to both students and teachers imploring them to develop introspection and curiosity. Eng challenges his readers to cultivate their own abilities. In a conversational tone that is rare and profound in an age that honors reductive and simplistic solutions, the author does not write a "how to" book but one that calls for teachers and students to think deeply as they engage with educational issues."

- **KAREL ROSE**, Professor, Brooklyn College,
School of Education, CUNY Graduate Center

"College instructors are rarely provided with explicit instruction in how to teach effectively. As a university faculty member for more than two decades, I remain puzzled by this phenomenon. Like author Norman Eng, I learned most of what I know about teaching from my experience in a teacher preparation program, as an elementary teacher, and through trial-and-error in college classrooms. Most university instructors, however, have not had the first two experiences and a number of them, in my experience, do not change how they teach to a great degree over the course of their careers. In this highly readable and well-organized text, Dr. Eng shares stories and specific examples from his own teaching and provides practical suggestions and action steps for college instructors seeking to enhance their effectiveness in working with students. As a lifelong teacher, I learned many strategies—including how to write a more effective syllabus, alternatives to lectures, and ways to actively engage students in learning—that I am eager to try after reading *Teaching College*. This book will appeal to both novice instructors and seasoned professors and would be especially useful for faculty members to read and discuss in groups in order to continue their professional growth and development as teachers, conversations we pursue far too infrequently in higher education."

- **APRIL BEDFORD**, Dean, School of Education,
Brooklyn College, City University of New York

"The practical strategies in the book is what's missing in higher ed. No other book helps college instructors with such step-by-step detail. A must read for the novice (and even seasoned) college instructor."

- **ALLAN ORNSTEIN**, education professor,
St. John's University, former Fulbright Scholar,
and author of 65 books and 400 articles

"*Teaching College* is the most 'bang for your buck' resource that I have seen for new college instructors. His advice is evidence-based and very practical. You can't go wrong with this book. Highly recommended."

- **GWENDOLYN METTETAL**, Director, University Center
for Excellence in Teaching (UCET),
Indiana University South Bend

"What a fantastic book! As someone who has taught in K-12 and college classrooms, I have often lamented the fact that K-12 teachers get so much preparation in the skills of teaching, while those at the college level get none. In *Teaching College*, Norman Eng closes that gap brilliantly, synthesizing education and marketing into a fresh approach that will significantly change the way college classes are taught worldwide. You will find useful insights and practical, actionable tips on every page, and all of it written in an approachable, conversational style. A must for anyone who teaches at the college level."

- **JENNIFER GONZALEZ**, Editor-in-Chief at *Cult of Pedagogy*

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and Engaging Students

Norman Eng, Ed.D.

Teaching College
The Ultimate Guide to Lecturing,
Presenting, and Engaging Students

To my family and friends:
You know who you are.
Thank you for your support.

To my K–12 and university colleagues:
Thank you for your wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever found yourself thinking:

I'm frustrated that students aren't doing the reading.

Getting my students to participate is like pulling teeth!

I'm on my own here. Who can I turn to for teaching support?

My students like me, but I'm not sure if they're really learning.

I have to teach a course. Now what?

I need a good course evaluation.

I thought I was a good teacher …

Why am I still doing most of the talking in class?

I know teaching is important, but I don't have time to plan.

My students are more focused on texting and surfing online than paying attention.

I want to be the best, but I don't know where to begin.

My teaching is fine—it's the students who don't care.

Help! My students are bored.

Aren't college students supposed to be mature enough to take learning seriously?

My students seem to be learning, but something is still missing.

Sometimes I feel like they just do the bare requirements. I want them to want more!

Students just want the A—they don't care about mastering the material.

If any of these thoughts have crossed your mind, you're not alone. Teaching in higher education is hard when you care. Unfortunately, there are two big problems: 1) *Your students don't care about your course*; and 2) *most college instructors (including full-time professors!) don't know how to teach.*

To address the first problem: students are busy. Possibly overwhelmed. But they do still care about doing well. Nonetheless, with up to four other courses, a low-paying job, a budding social life, the stresses of building a career, and family responsibilities—not to mention the distractions of social media—undergraduates have

competing priorities.[1] Unless your course connects with students in some way, they won't invest beyond the requirements.

Second: college instructors don't ever learn how to teach. There is no training program or teaching license requirements as there are for their K–12 (kindergarten through Grade 12) counterparts. Graduate and doctoral programs focus exclusively on cultivating subject matter expertise. While that helps professors do research, it doesn't qualify them to mold impressionable minds.

So we learn to teach by imitating what our professors did—we lecture. In fact, lecturing is still the most dominant form of instruction in college,[*] with over half of faculty using it in all or most of their classes.[2] Evidence, however, shows that traditional stand-and-deliver lectures do little to help students learn,[3] much less retain what they have learned.

Making the problem worse is the fact that more and more college faculty are contingent (part time or non-tenure track professors). At least 50 percent are adjunct instructors.[4] Aside from job instability, contingent faculty lack the administrative support that full-time, tenured faculty receive, such as securing copies of required textbooks and student email addresses, limited access to professional development courses, and the ability to participate in departmental meetings.[5] This makes it hard to ensure consistent, quality instruction.

What happens when you combine a lack of pedagogical training with student indifference? A crisis in higher education. In their book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa found that almost half of U.S. students don't improve their reasoning or writing skills during the first two years of college. And after four years, more than one-third of students (36%) still show no real gains. Furthermore, traditional lectures simply do not foster real-world skills like innovating, collaborating, and continuous learning.[6] What then is the point of attending college? No wonder today's graduates are unprepared for the real world, according to employers.[7]

As a college instructor, you can change this.

The Solution: Learn from Marketers and K–12 Teachers

While you can't control institutional factors at the university level (i.e., funding, culture, etc.), you can get students to care more. You can also learn to teach effectively. This book shows you how, by adopting the approaches used in two industries—*marketing* and *K–12 education*.

Marketers *know* how to reach audiences. They are experts when it comes to building relationships and making consumers care. How? By figuring out what they need, what frustrates them—and then solving that problem. Google, for instance, streamlined information search. Amazon simplified online buying. Uber and

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[*] While lectures are still the main form of instruction (see Goffe and Kauper, 2014; Macdonald, Manduca, Mogk, and Tewksbury, 2005; Smith and Valentine, 2012), the use of discussions has expanded significantly over the past two decades (Eagan et al., 2014)

Airbnb did the same for car service and accommodations, respectively. Netflix solved on-demand streaming media. The entrepreneurs behind these behemoths were salespeople who knew how to market their products and services.

As an educator, you are doing the same. In his book, *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*, psychologist Daniel H. Pink argues that teachers are sellers of ideas. That's how you inspire students and change their behavior. Therefore, without the ability to finger your students' problems, you won't solve them. Do you actually know what keeps your students up at night? What problems they face in life, in school, and in your class? This book shows you the secrets marketers use to uncover their audience's problems, build relationships, and connect with their customers.

The other industry professors can learn from is K–12 education. The best schoolteachers know which pedagogical tools and strategies engage students. For instance, they use *exit tickets* as one way to check if students are actually learning. They use *cold-calling* to improve student participation. They cultivate a safe and supportive classroom community as the first order of business. These are just a few of the many K–12 principles you will learn to enhance your pedagogical effectiveness by a factor of ten.

Also, simply knowing how to teach is not enough. You'd be surprised how many education professors—who supposedly know the latest pedagogical approaches—can't seem to connect with their students. The reverse is also true. Knowing how to communicate doesn't mean knowing how to teach. You can't be effective without knowing the right instructional methods to use.[*]

As a former marketing executive and K–12 teacher, I've applied the perspectives from both industries to college teaching with astounding results. *Teaching College: The Ultimate Guide to Lecturing, Presenting, and Engaging Students* captures these insights into a concise guide for the busy and frustrated instructor who wants to supercharge their pedagogy *now*.

If you follow this guide, you will improve. Students will raise their hands more, invest in their assignments, and give you better end-of-term evaluations. Even better, you can read this book today and implement the strategies tomorrow—even if you've already defined your syllabus for the semester. With this clear step-by-step guide, you will have an advantage over other instructors in your department—including established professors. All you have to do is keep reading and following the action steps. Each chapter will give you new insight as you strive to become the best instructor. Don't wait. Your students—and your reputation—depend on it.

Is This Book for You?

If you are an early career instructor or professor, then this book is for you. This may include graduate (or

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[*] While both the ability to teach and the ability to communicate are necessary, I believe the latter is even more critical. If professors thought more like marketers, they would be more effective teachers.

teaching) assistants, assistant professors, adjunct instructors, or other contingent faculty who have less pedagogical experience and want a practical, step-by-step guide to conducting a college class. *Teaching College* is meant to help you, the busy instructor see teaching as communicating and connecting—two areas top marketers and K–12 teachers do consistently.

However, seasoned instructors—including tenured professors—can also benefit from the contents in this book. Most will not have undergone pedagogical training and can leverage this book's marketing and K–12 approaches/strategies.

Teaching College is not for those who consider teaching less important than their scholarly (research) endeavors. It is also not for those who believe good teaching is instinctive—that some professors simply have "it" while others don't. Every single effective teacher I've come across regularly reflects on and refines his or her craft.

Keep in Mind as You Read …

Like teaching, this book is not "one-size-fits-all." No instructional guide can be. Some strategies work best for small classes whereas others can work for large, lecture-hall classes. You as the instructor have to find which ones work best with your particular situation and your individual disposition. Similarly, some courses, such as those in social science and STEM(science, technology, engineering, and math), may lend themselves more easily to strategies in this book but professors in liberal arts courses have also validated many of these strategies. The marketer's mindset discussed in Chapter 2, for instance, applies across the board, whether the class has 350 students or is focused on music theory. That one approach can dramatically improve the way you teach, no matter the size of the class or the discipline.

Although these ideas have been tested and validated through experience and research, this book is not, nor is it intended to be, viewed the same as peer-reviewed research. I simply want to pass along what two industries— business marketing and K–12 education—have taught me.

As such, I write without academic jargon. Footnotes are used, citations are given, and claims are made without phrases like "these data suggest…"

"Pro Tips" are provided throughout the book. These tactics and ideas are based on years of trial-and-error and can save you time and frustration. Each pro tip is highlighted with a graphic of a graduation cap/light bulb.

At the end of the book, I recommend specific books, links, or resources (and highlight those that are free). I do *not* get paid to do this. In other words, I do not use affiliate marketing to direct traffic to another site and earn commission for referrals. You can be assured that my recommendations are based solely on quality and content.

I will update this book to reflect my continued experiences as well as the latest research in neuroscience, pedagogy/education, child/human development, and communication. More than anything else, I want to spread

the message about the importance of teaching, particularly at the collegiate level. Universities across the US are the envy of the world, but truthfully, that is due more to the reputation borne from the research coming out of the universities than the teaching. If we can apply that same rigor to our instruction, then more students will learn and thrive in the twenty-first century global society. I want as many teachers as possible—instructors, lecturers, adjuncts, and assistant professors—to read this book and apply its message to their classroom.

This book does not and cannot cover everything. Certain "progressive" approaches to teaching, such as *team-based learning* (TBL), *project-based learning* (PBL), the *flipped classroom*, and *online instruction* are not covered. While I see them powerfully shaping student learning in the future, they require extensive professional development training or, at the very least, a dedicated book. Unfortunately, the existing nature of higher education academia, with its emphasis on publishing and other professional responsibilities, makes it hard for professors to invest in teaching as K–12 teachers do. Furthermore, adjuncts and instructors have less access to departmental support than their tenured counterparts. This makes it harder to streamline good pedagogy.

This guide, therefore, aims to *meet busy instructors where they are*. This means improving lectures by incorporating more interactive and hands-on work. Helping instructors redo their syllabi. Implementing strategies to encourage student participation.

As a final note, this book is a work in progress. Not everything here will work for every instructor or student. In fact, making peace with the idea that sometimes a student will not receive your approach or strategy well has helped me see how much more there is to learn. Implementing the best strategies does *not* guarantee every student will suddenly learn more effectively in a given semester or that instructors will receive significantly higher departmental or student evaluations. In fact, research suggests that "active learning," the kind of approach this book argues for, works only when instructors know how to use it.[8] Simply incorporating debates or games may engage students more, but their excitement can also mask actual learning. The point is to use the recommendations in this book as a starting point and build from experience. In the end, I guarantee you will be significantly more effective than you were yesterday.

The insights and strategies you're about to read have been proven to create positive, long-lasting results. As you read, consider how they might be applied to your particular course(s). OK, enough of this. Let's get to it.

PART 1

Lay the Groundwork

CHAPTER 1

Understand the Common Problems of Lecturing

"For class today I'll be reading the PowerPoint word for word for word."
–Every professor, everywhere. (@CollegeGirlHumor, June 16, 2013)

Irreverent it may be, but this tweet captures how frustrated college students feel about their professors.[*] Many feel their professors aren't teaching at all, in the sense they are not helping students understand, internalize, and apply what they read. Instead, they feel instructors regurgitate too much information from the texts. Too often, instructors rely on PowerPoint or one-sided lectures that leave students bored and disengaged.

The result? Little to no learning.

In talks on pedagogy, teaching expert Eric Mazur asks audiences to think about something they are really good at, like a skill. He then asks them to think about *how* they became really good at that skill, whether by trial and error, apprenticeship, lectures, or advice from family and friends. The largest group, about 60 percent, selected "practicing" as the route to mastery.

Zero percent chose lectures.[9] "The danger with lucid lectures … is that they create the illusion of teaching for teachers, and the illusion of learning for learners," Mazur summarized.[10] Lectures, at least in the traditional sense, rarely help.

So what exactly constitutes a lecture? Most instructors see it in terms of the teacher talking most of the time, interspersed with the occasional question or short discussion. Purists, however, see lectures as "continuous expositions by the speaker who wants the audience to learn something."[11] For this book, I am referring to both above definitions when talking about lectures—expositions by the teacher that *dominate* class sessions (think big

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[*] Note I use the terms *professor*, *instructor*, *adjunct*, and *lecturer* interchangeably, even though there are clear distinctions. I will typically use *instructor* as a catchall for anyone teaching a college course, including graduate assistants. In the end, students see us as *professors*. I will specify among the terms where necessary.

lecture halls) as well as those that *largely make up* the class.

So, what are some of the common problems that plague bad lectures? Based on informal discussions with students and colleagues, as well as research and experience, I explore three main issues below. Which one characterizes your lectures?

Problem #1: Lectures That Are Too Dense or Too Long

In my first year teaching a foundations course, I used the PowerPoint template that came with the instructor's copy of the textbook. I didn't know any better. It gave me a much-needed lesson structure. The problem was the slides took 45 minutes to cover, if not longer. Students were nodding off, checking their phones and yawning. They would frequently "go to the bathroom." Even though the class clearly liked me, they wanted more "hands-on" work (read: *practice* and *experience*), according to evaluations. That hit me hard, because I take criticisms personally.

Dense and long lectures tend to duplicate the material from assigned readings. *Today, I'll be going over the major concepts from this week's reading* … Sound familiar? The instructor hopes to explain and clarify the material so that students can recall it for papers and tests. Often, such lectures take up most if not all of the class. Here are three signs your lecture is too dense and/or too long: 1) When taking notes is the primary thing students do in class; 2) when students appear bored or sleepy; and/or 3) when they cannot summarize what they just learned at the end of class or the following class. (Have you ever checked? We'll talk about *exit slips* in Chapter 10.)

So why do we lecture so much? Usually, it's to cover the textbook or the curriculum. We want students to know, or at least be familiar with, all the core concepts and figures associated with a given topic.[*] My phys-ed majors complain about having to memorize all the parts of the human body for their required physiology class. It's tedious when the instructor just explicates the function of every muscle and bone, they say.

But it's only ninety minutes, you may be thinking. No. Students hear lecture after lecture after lecture—every day. No wonder they retain so little of what you say, no matter how clearly you say it. Studies find students retain less than 30 percent of what they hear.[12] In many cases, they barely know more by the end of the semester than students who've never even take the course—only 8 percent more, in one study of psychology students.[13]

Furthermore, students have lives that don't revolve around instructors' perfectly planned lectures (sorry, but it's true). Novice instructors who love their discipline often make the mistake of planning for the "ideal" student[14]—one who reads their overly long syllabi (most don't), does complex assignments correctly the first

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[*] Weimer (2002) describes this common teaching perspective as the "more is better" approach (p. 46)

time (which rarely happens), or answers questions thoughtfully and critically. Real students are working, caring for siblings, and taking five other courses—all of which also require their undivided attention. You can't expect them to be mentally present all the time.

Think about the oral presentations you assign in class. I've observed classrooms where a student presents a topic—say, for instance, the theory of multiple intelligences—where she *shoehorns* every detail about the theorist behind it, including when he was born and what influenced his work.

While appropriate for a biography essay, it is completely inappropriate as a presentation, because it serves no benefit to the rest of the class. The presenter, after all, only cares about demonstrating how much she knows to the evaluator—you. She has no interest in engaging her classmates. Her text-heavy slides reflect this mindset. Have you ever looked around the room during student presentations? It's agonizing. The rest of the class couldn't care less. They'd rather you teach.

One rule of thumb schoolteachers use to determine appropriate lesson length is to take the children's age and double it. So, if you're teaching seven-year olds (around second grade), you shouldn't spend more than fifteen minutes talking before they lose focus. Often times, it is even less, which is why many teachers even use the *age rule* to plan lessons: seven-year-olds shouldn't have to sit still for more than seven minutes at a time on a task.

These rules are unproven, but they are meant to give you an idea. Developmentally, children simply can't sit still for long, nor can they remember much after that. Adults aren't that different. Long periods of talking will make them squirm. Studies confirm this. College students' attention starts high at the beginning and peaks around fifteen to twenty minutes into a lecture.[15] They retain 70 percent of the information in the first ten minutes of a lecture but only 20 percent in the last ten minutes.[16] After that, they go into a "brain drift." Attention never returns.

As such, didactic lectures should remain bite-sized and interspersed. Even if you add in "new" material not covered in the text, it should be concise and relevant. Add in other *modalities*, such as discussions, questions, and activities throughout—something we will go over in Chapter 6, *Engage Your Audience*.

In short: College students love a change of pace just as much as kids. Get them out of their seats.

Problem #2: Lectures Disconnected from Students

Related to long and dense lectures are those that are one-sided affairs. When professors employ the traditional "direct instruction" approach, students can't relate to the topic or concepts being taught. They become passive learners. A famous quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin (but in fact taken from Chinese Confucian philosopher Xunzi) says, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." Students gain by being active, rather than passive, learners.

Lectures need to relate to students' lives, which explains why we have to know our intended audience. Making a topic relevant will make it interesting, like connecting the Civil War with sibling fights.

On the flip side, just because a fact is interesting doesn't make it relevant. For example, it might be nice to know that the small intestines are 23 feet long (7 meters) … but who cares? Unless it relates to the audience's needs, then it remains just that—an interesting fact.

Part of the problem is what psychologists call the "curse of knowledge,"[17] or the "expert blind spot."[18] This is an egocentric tendency (particularly among intellectuals) to overestimate what our audience knows. As disciplinary scholars, we take for granted standard industry terms like *regression*, *implications*, and *literature review*, because we tend to forget how hard it was to learn something once we know it. Think of it like giving directions. I think I'm being clear when I tell a tourist on the New York City subway to "go to the other side of the platform and take the downtown R train to SoHo." Yet the other person's probably thinking, *First of all, what do you mean by "the other side"? Does the R train only go downtown or are all downtown trains R trains? What stop is SoHo?* Tourists operate from limited background knowledge.

Yet we often forget that. Students come in with all levels of knowledge and literacies about our discipline, and our high-level jargon flies over their heads. And they won't admit being confused. Students just jot notes and hope to make sense of them later. If you ever hear your students saying, "I think I understand this," that means they *don't* (physicist Richard Feynman once said something similar). We can't assume students get what we say. Connecting with them *where they are*—not where they ought to be—is more important.[19]

Problem #3: Lectures That Rely On Slides

Finally, too many instructors hide behind slideware like PowerPoint. One study found that a majority of sociology professors (55%) reported using PowerPoint frequently (meaning at least 75 percent of class meetings) or always.[20] Of those students, 66 percent say their professors use PowerPoint in all or most of their class sessions.

Although useful, slides aren't supposed to replace the lecture. Students seem to agree, if the following comments (posted via Twitter and elsewhere) are any indication:

Being a college professor would be easy. Read off a PowerPoint you made 10 years ago and give online quizzes with questions you googled [sic]. (@Blazik, March 27, 2013)

I hate when a professor makes class mandatory and reads straight from the PowerPoint instead of actually teaching … I can do that at home. (@Breannedwards)

Y'all ever sat in a class, copied every word down off the power point [sic], and still not kno [sic] a damn thing the professor said? (@_BlkSuperMan, Febraury 7, 2014)

I frequently write down blindly anything that is written on the PowerPoint without absorbing it until studying for the test. Also, when I'm copying down the PowerPoint words I'm not usually listening to the instructor. Power

Point minimizes the engagement I have with a class and instead condenses it into a few slides with bullet points.[21]

On the other hand, professors do have their reasons for using PowerPoint. It organizes our thoughts, structures our lessons, and helps us remember what to say. Textbook publishers like Pearson know this, so they include ready-made lecture slides with their teacher editions of textbooks. It's tempting for professors to use them and maybe even tweak them (I know I have). On the whole, however, ready-made slides harm teaching and learning, as one computer science student blogger asserts:

The problem is that when the professor does not [create his or her own] presentation, they run the risk of sounding like they don't know what they're talking about. My current Operating Systems professor suffers from this. As each new slide comes up, he takes a second to read it and then starts with, "Okay, what this slide is talking about is …" or "What they mean by this is …" As opposed to explaining the material himself, it sounds like he just expects us to read the slides, and then let him elaborate.[22]

No wonder PowerPoint is considered the most significant teaching factor contributing to boredom![23] Avoid using (or even adapting) ready-made slides. However, if you know how to incorporate PowerPoint into your lecture, it can powerfully facilitate student engagement and learning. This will be covered in Chapter 8, *Use Slides as Support*.

Despite all the problems with lectures, of which the above are only the most common, I am not against them. Lectures can move audiences when done properly. The TEDTalks events, where people present "ideas worth sharing," is one example where lectures clearly work. As one professor stated,

I have never believed that there was intrinsic damage being done to students in what has been called the "sage on the stage" model of teaching. I don't think it's always bad to listen to an expert talk about what she knows best, and I don't think that the discussion format is inherently better than the lecture format merely because the latter allows the students to express their opinions. On the contrary, I think that a truly great lecturer has the capacity to change a student's life, and I think that there is something valuable in students listening to a person who has an effortless command of a subject, in seeing the kind of dedication and erudition a fine lecturer embodies.[24]

The key, then, is to maximize your lecture. We'll get to that in Chapter 5, *Develop Your Topic*.

Summary and Action Step

To wrap up, lectures that are too dense/long, disconnected, or overly rely on slides can undermine student learning and engagement. Other problems exist, such as poor classroom management, but can be remedied with the right approach—something we discuss in the next chapter—and a well-structured, prepared lesson.

So, here are two action steps to take:

1. Ask yourself what mistakes you have made or have seen too many times in lectures and presentations that hurt student engagement. List 3–5 of them. It will help you recognize your shortcomings and steer clear of them when we move into the next segment.

2. Find a topic you teach and have that ready for the next chapter. For example, I teach a course on child development, so one topic I would teach is Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

The next chapter, *Focus on the Student, Not the Content*, will change how you approach your course—I guarantee it.

You have reached the end of Chapter 1 for
Teaching College: The Ultimate Guide to Lecturing, Presenting, and Engaging Students.

To buy the book, please visit:
http://NormanEng.org/TeachingCollege