

The Greatness of College Lectures

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The other week I saw Scott McCloud give a presentation at a local college. Although he is not a professor himself, McCloud is a theorist of comics. Edward Tufte (among countless others) calls his guide *Understanding Comics* the best book on the medium. McCloud breaks comics down to its essential: the use of sequential art to tell a story — we see one thing, we see another, we imagine what happens in between. And watching McCloud speak, I realized that his talk was a vivid form of comics. The images weren't just illustrations, they drove the story along, with McCloud simply filling in the words to connect them together.

After his talk, someone commented that McCloud's presentation was the best he'd ever seen. McCloud explained that there are two kinds of presentations: “monkey bars”, where a presenter swings from slide to slide, explaining each one in turn, and “magic carpet rides”, where the presenter simply keeps talking, confident the slides will appear underneath him to illustrate a point. McCloud gives a masterful magic carpet ride.

Tufte himself is professor emeritus at Yale. These days he goes on tour, rock-star style, teaching classes on presenting information. Tufte is a brilliant presenter — his energy keeps the audience spell-bound for an entire day. At one point, as I recall, he jumped up on a table and asked us to imagine the information density of various media as charted from one side of the room to the other. But what, I couldn't help but wonder, was the information density of this presentation? After all, hadn't he written four books on the subject? (Copies of which are given to each participant to take home.)

Then there's Lawrence Lessig, who's presentations are so powerful and influential that an entire style of presentation has been named after him. At his peak, I saw him give a talk at the O'Reilly Open Source Conference that had the audience, as Wes Felter put it, looking to start a riot afterwards. Lessig's rhythmic, almost hypnotic, presentation, invariably blows people away.

Does these people's talks communicate more information than their books? I doubt it. But does a comic book communicate more information than a novel? No way. And yet McCloud (and Tufte) endorse it anyway. It's not because of the medium's informational density, it's because of its *emotional density*. The same is true of these presentations.

Reading Lessig's books, you'll probably learn more about the history of copyright law and the other things he discusses in his talk. But you won't feel his righteous indignation against those “extremists on the right and left” who are trying to distort its intentions and, in the process, hurt our culture.

Writing is quite effective at communicating facts, but to become a professional you need much more than a vast store of facts; you need to learn ways of thinking. These are what lectures, at their best, can provide. They show you how the speakers think about problems, how they feel about them, and, in doing so, provide a more fleshed-out notion than writing ever could.