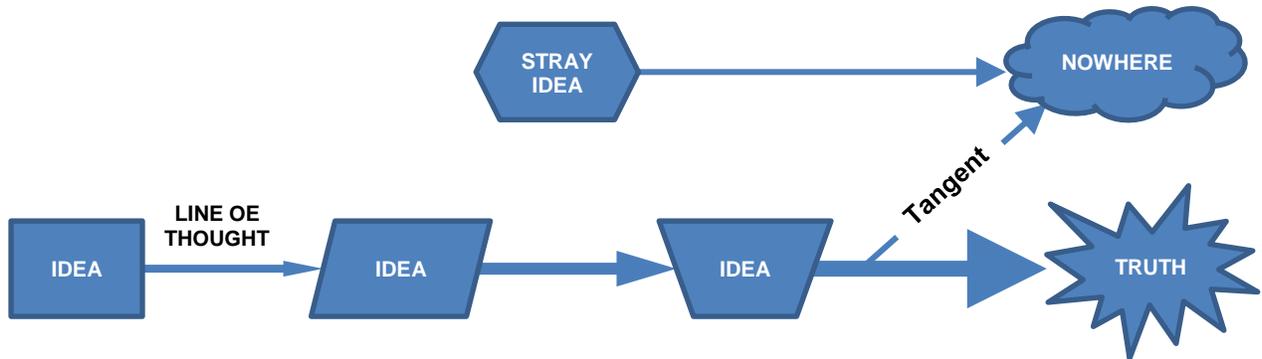


The Key to Tangential Learning in a Hardin Class

Tangent: (n) 1. A divergence from an original course or goal. 2. A concept can be described as tangent to another concept if they touch each other in some ways but are generally distinct. Origin: Latin *tangent-*, *tangens*, present participle of *tangere* to touch; perhaps akin to Old English *thaccian* to touch gently, stroke, brush against; First Known Use: 1594.

YOUR CONCEPT OF A TANGENT



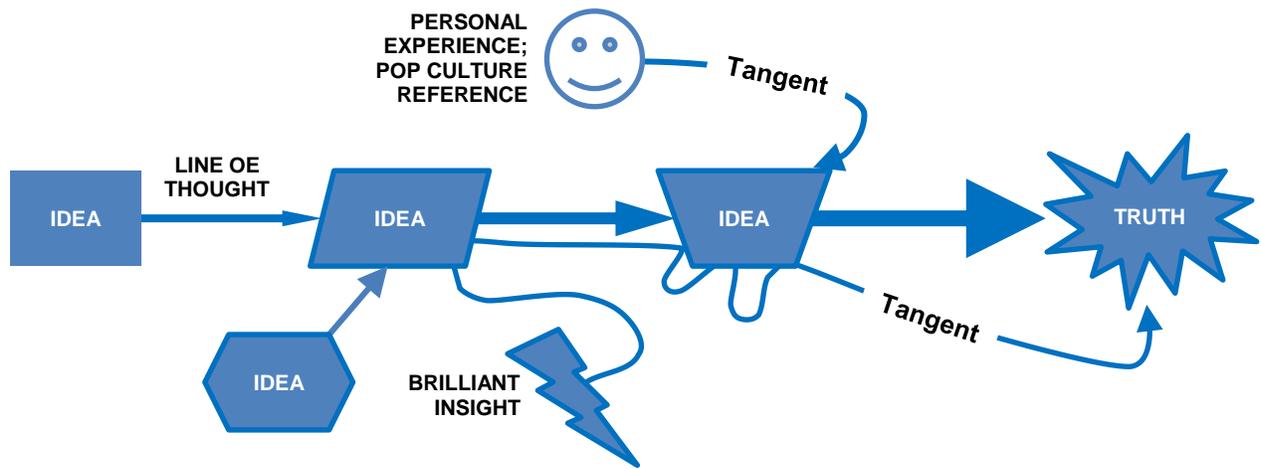
Generally, your conception of how lecturing should work – and usually does work – is by connecting ideas with lines of thought that ultimately lead to a greater concept or “truth.” Each line of thought is magnified or intensified by passing through the lens of additional ideas until the ultimate objective is achieved. Stray ideas are inefficient and lead nowhere. Tangents that diverge from the flow toward truth also lead nowhere. Nowhere usually is to be avoided at all cost.

Believe it or not, I follow the generally-accepted model of how lecture flow usually functions. All of my PowerPoint lecture slides have an outline embedded in them called “titles.” They descend from main topic, to subtopics or regions, and place names or dates. If they are associated with a map, one or another of the subheadings typically will use the color that corresponds to the map key, thusly:



So here, we’d be talking about **European religions**, specifically the **Eastern Orthodox** Branch of **Christianity** in **Croatia** and the example of the landscape feature of icons – this one in the settlement of Japaga (the only restored post-war icon I have found in my study area of Western Slavonia).

HOW MY TANGENTS WORK



What some students perceive as “tangents” really aren’t. Knowledge is messy and very rarely is it linear. To be sure, there should be a theme that is followed (see slide heading outlines above), but ideas can come in from outside a perceived chain of thought at any time that can add nuance. I like to inject related personal anecdotes and pop cultural references to try to humanize subjects and ideas in hopes of making material more relevant to you. Are they tangents? Yes. Are my pop culture references stale? Too often. Will they ever appear on an exam? Almost never (filming locations for the desert planet of Tatooine for “Star Wars: A New Hope” *are* relevant to human adaptation to the subtropical high Sahara desert biome). I have 30 years of teaching experience – 25 of those as a Ph.D. – and a wealth of personal experience and knowledge. If you don’t want to hear about real-world experiences sprinkled in with your bare-bones geographic lectures, by all means check out any number of online classes of dubious quality available to you online or at your local community college. Sometimes, tangents take the form of brilliant insights that roughly parallel a theme but moving in a less-linear path: backtracking to ideas, weaving them together in a different way, skirting around the edges of ideas, delving deeper into them, leaving, returning tangentially, all on the way to the truth of the matter. Is that a tangent? Yes. But one thing about my tangents is they usually aid in getting to or reinforcing the ultimate concepts a lecture is working toward. Yes, bad tangents go nowhere. Am I guilty of bad tangents? Yes. Luckily, if you don’t understand where I’m going with something and suspect there’s bad tangentry afoot, you always have the magical ability to throw a metaphorical penalty flag by *asking a question*. Perhaps each semester should begin with tangent-penalty-flag construction for throwing when needed? Hmm...there’s a thought.

A general rule: you are responsible for any lecture materials that appear on the PowerPoint slides. That means anything I say *directly relating to images and illustrations thereon* may appear on an exam. Personal anecdotes and pop cultural references will not appear on exams. I never have asked if the Loch Ness Monster is real, but I think I can expect that you know Loch Ness is in Scotland. Expect that anything I write on the board might appear on an exam. I do not “put more notes on the slides” for a very good reason: *I expect you to take notes on what I’m saying*. I suppose I could give you all the notes beforehand and fill class time with busywork and quizzes. Hmm...there’s a thought.

Dr. David S. Hardin
January, 2015