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Effective Lecturing

The following is the text of a presentation given by Ersted Award winner, Susan Glaser, at a Teaching Effectiveness Program Symposium on effective lecturing.

When I started teaching as a graduate student in 1971 lecturing had really bad press. It was only done by the people who weren't creative enough to think of some other way to get the information across. So I started out my life as a lecturer thinking that somehow if you had to resort to that it was because there was nothing else that you were either willing or able to think about to get information to others. It didn't take long to realize that there were certain clusters of information that you simply could not get through without lecturing and that like it or not lecturing was going to be a major part of my life. It also became clear that coming from a communication and rhetoric background, within my field was the answer to making lecturing something that was as alive for people as other kinds of experiences in the classroom.

I'm going to be covering three main dimensions of lecturing:

1. What we can do to make our lectures interesting and involving
2. What can we do to make them clear and understandable
3. Anxiety - what do you do if you're feeling nervous and jittery

Let me begin by talking about the issue of being interesting and involving. We share a problem as academics. By the time we get to the point where we're teaching other people, we've assumed that our topic is inherently interesting. After all, look at how many years we've studied it. And somehow that assumption leads us to believe that all we have to do is give the facts and they're there to retain them and that this inherent interest should carry them through. Somehow it's so easy to lose the drama that originally captured our own imagination and made us decide to commit a lifetime to this topic.

To me from vertebrae to Chaucer there is some drama that is not inherent, but can be communicated. That's where interest and involvement begin. By recreating the drama that once excited us, it forces us to look at this issue of audience.

In my field, speech, communication and rhetoric, the audience is central. Audience means continually looking to the group and figuring them out. What would involve them, what would motivate them, what would intrigue them. During my years in school, I never had one history teacher who captured the essence and excitement of history for me. All history was ever about from 4th grade to college was memorizing dates and places, parts of the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights - memorizing all these things without a sense of the excitement of history.

Recreating the excitement of our disciplines means finding a way to attach ideas to something that the audience can remember and I'm going to give you an example from yesterday when I failed miserably at this. I was talking about attraction and the variables that predict attraction. One of the variables that predict attraction is similarity of values. So I thought that if I'm going to try to teach about similarity of values I need to come up with a good example that my students could relate to. I picked an example nobody could relate to. What I wanted to tell them was that when I voted for McGovern all of my friends voted for McGovern and I thought he was going to win. People surround themselves with people with similar attitudes and values. Because of our age difference, my students didn't know that McGovern lost or who he was. I had not met the

audiences expectation for what would be interesting and motivating and involving for them.

When we talk about this whole notion, I go back to the article that was in Old Oregon 3 or 4 years ago. The person interviewed a whole number of Ersted Award winners and the basic content of the argument was is teaching drama? When I was interviewed, my answer was yes, and told them all the reasons I thought there needed to be an element of drama in teaching. When I read the article I was really in the minority because a big portion of the people thought that by the time people are in college we shouldn't have to entertain them.

One of the things that I got in that article was that there's a very strong belief by university faculty that teaching shouldn't be performance. By the time people are at the university, they are done with Sesame street. The notion that we have to entertain is really quite negative. I think that when we try to make something live and breathe, our goal is to create understanding and mastery, love of the subject and commitment to learning. It somehow has to be more than sending out the facts and having people learn and memorize them. How do we do this? How do we make a lecture interesting and involving?

The first notion that I want to talk with you about is one again from my discipline. It's called exigence. In my field exigence is a rhetorical term and the definition is a situational urgency. It's something waiting to be done, that discourse needs to address. How does exigence fit into teaching? Well, I think one of the things we need to do as teachers when we're lecturing about our content area is to create exigence for our students - a need to know, a desire to learn more, a fascination with it. So that we cannot just put out information into this black box, but into these minds that are saying I want to hear more.

Back tracking on what I've talked to you about today - my own effort, what I just tried to do was have you saying, "Yeah, that's really true. Interest is important, tell us more. Tell us how to make it happen." Tell us what to do about it. One of the things we have to continually do as teachers is get people to be saying to themselves, "Wow, this is interesting. Tell me more."

Cheap attempts don't count - "This is going to be one the final." That doesn't count. Another one happened when I was in Pennsylvania traveling around the state teaching teachers about communication skills. One teacher I worked with used to dress up in a gorilla suit to get his students attention. He said - "When I'm wearing the gorilla suit, they always pay attention." Another fellow kept a cap gun under the lectern and when people got drowsy he would pull it out and fire it and startle them awake. Last fall when I gave this lecture to the GTFs, one GTF came up to me and told me that her most obnoxious lecturer used as his way of getting attention spitting on the floor.

Those are all efforts to capture the attention of an audience in ways that not only violate the human spirit, but do nothing for the topic. The notion that you're getting attention that has nothing to do with what you're going to be about strikes me as being a total waste of time. So the issue of getting people's attention and interest and involvement needs to be on the topic being addressed. Instead of having people memorize the Bill of Rights, what the teacher needs to do is to give people the drama, the excitement of why that is such a special document.

Now it's one thing to initiate interest at the beginning. What can I do to start this lecture off and get people interested and excited about it. It's another thing to maintain interest throughout the lecture. That takes a real conscious thought process and filtering things throughout consciously and ahead of time.

I believe the single greatest contributor to interest throughout a lecture are examples. Let's talk

about what examples are because all examples are not equal. One of the severest problems that I've observed in teachers is clumping together concept after concept after concept. I believe that every major concept that's presented needs an example to ground it, an example that makes that concept live and breathe. An example is a story that has characters and a plot. Don't let that scare you. Examples don't have to drone on and on. You can talk about an example quickly. Think about examples as little mini dramas with characters and a plot. When the person hears the example, they remember your concept. When they forget your concept, they remember your example and then remember your concept.

How do you get them this vivid? There is an interesting scale in my field called the Flesh Scale. Now it sounds real racy, but the guy who invented it was Rudolf Flesh. The Flesh Scale is used to analyze discourse to discover the persuasive potential within it. One of the things that people who have used the flesh scale have discovered is that the more personal references there are in the dialogue, the greater it's remembered. Personal reference doesn't just mean about the speaker, but it's referring to real live human beings doing real live things and the extent to which that occurs in discourse is the extent to which people listen to it, hear it and remember it.

One of the best people on this campus at doing this is Lorraine Davis. Lorraine teaches statistics and is also an Ersted Award winner. I took it twice from her and was so enamored with the way she taught statistics. She never taught a statistical process that wasn't immediately followed with some real live examples so that people could see that these aren't just numbers jumping around on the page. These numbers mean things and they can be used to understand and predict and explain. Her ability to weave examples into the teaching of statistics was overpowering. It was a great example of how you can use examples even in areas that people think are not visual.

The second is analogy, comparing the known with the unknown to try to make the unknown clearer. One example of analogy that I heard recently was from Carl Sagan who was teaching about cells and about biology. The analogy he used when talking about the cell was that the cell is a micro universe and he carried that analogy through and it really did help to understand this notion of cellness. Analogy can also be used to help make statistics become clearer. One statistic that I heard recently used with an analogy really helped. The person was doing a program on safety in the workplace and the point that he was making was about the number of accidents on the job, the number of people who died every year and it was a very large number. People hear the number and thought about the number. But what really brought it home was when he said that that was more than the number of people who died in any given year of the Vietnam conflict. Then that number took on extra meaning, because with that analogy it had an emotional element, not just logic.

One of the things we're trying to do in a lecture is touch our audience emotionally, not just logically because that's when they remember, that's when they're fascinated by it, that's when they want to study it more.

We've had so far, in terms of ways to promote interest - examples, analogies and the way of combining both analogy and statistics. Now let me talk about another way to maintain interest throughout and this has been brought up by different people in three different ways. Some people talked about voice tone, some people talked about monotony. All together they go under the heading of delivery. Delivery is also part of the message. So far I've talked primarily about the content of the message- ways to make the material live for the people who are listening. There is something about the way we deliver it, too, that is meaningful. I hear about charisma and dynamism. Those words always get me very nervous because as a social scientist and a behaviorist, somehow you can't really grab on to dynamism and teach it. How are you going to teach people how to be charismatic when the word is just plain scary. Thinking about words like

dynamism and charisma, I believe you can break down the magic entirely and come up with concrete, non emotional and pragmatic features and that's what I'd like to talk about now. I think when it comes right down to it , a charismatic person is not reading from a script. They are looking at the people, talking directly to the audience, making eye contact with the people. Now when I talk about eye contact you have to get straight on this. Eye contact is not scanning the lines of faces. It seems that you have to stay with someone for several seconds before they feel they've been looked at. One of the things that eye contact does for me is to make a big group feel small. I can honestly say that at this point in my life I don't get intimidated by big groups because I talk to only one person at a time. And if you talk to only one person at a time, that person will come through for you. Then when you're feeling a little braver, you can start to look at the people who might appear to be a little less interested and draw them in by the fact that you're looking at them. So eye contact is a really important delivery feature. It's not the only one.

The other ones are interesting because they're so obvious, but people often think they don't have control over them. Those are variety of pitch, volume, rate and movement. Pitch, volume, rate and movement. Let me talk pitch. I know that everyone in this room has had at one time in their life a professor that talked on only one pitch. It can daze people into total oblivion. The problem with the lack of variety of pitch is that it's so easy to get hypnotized by it and lulled into sleep. One of the things that people have more control of than they imagine is variety of pitch. So I'm going to really exaggerate this. Sometimes you can talk in a lower register and make points in a higher register so that people can get the full extreme of your voice. It's possible to do it and have full control over the range. One of the delivery variables that people can control is pitch.

Okay, lets talk about rate. Fast speakers can really distort you. Now sometimes it's kind of nice because they're almost at the pace of our thinking and it's good to be able to talk quickly for awhile. But there's also the reverse of people who talk so slow that you just want them to spit it out. Maybe there's a point that you want to chug for, build up some excitement and then stop and make your point with a slower word pace. We can vary pitch and rate.

Third thing that we can vary is volume. With a very low volume it makes listening strained. I was on a panel once and this person had one of the most interesting topics. The topics was athletes and industry. His message was that if you are in industry, if you are blue collar labor, you are an athlete and if you don't treat your body like an athlete treats his body you are in trouble. And it was a really interesting topic. This guy was a weight coach before he went on to be a speaker on the topic. His voice was so loud that I fell asleep because the loudness of it was too much for my brain. It's not a matter of how loud can you get, it has to do with variety.

Okay, let's talk about movement. What is variety of movement? One thing it isn't is pacing. Pacers can drive you to distraction. It becomes totally undifferentiated movement. There is no particular way you need to move except, again, the issue of variety. If you want to make it more dynamic, if it's intended to try to create more excitement, then what that means is that variety needs to happen. And what that means is standing behind the podium constantly doesn't make it. It also means that pacing back and forth doesn't do it. It means that somehow I need to find out what I'm comfortable with and make it a little different moment to moment. The more different it is the more people's brains are getting recalibrated to listen.

Let me tie together this first portion. What we've talked about so far are ways to get at interest and involvement. We talked about how to get people involved initially, to get people into the topic and then talked about some ways to create involvement throughout the lecture - through analogies, through statistics and finally through delivery variables. What I'd like to talk about now is - what happens if a lecture is involving, but not clear?

Have you ever been to a lecture that was kind of interesting, kept your interest, but at the end you walked out scratching your head and wondering what it was all about? Part of what we need to do is be involving and interesting, but the other part is being clear. One of the things I do when I'm giving a lecture is ask myself, "If I were sitting in this classroom, could I take notes on my own lecture?" The clarity part for me is easiest to do when I think about my lecture in terms of someone taking notes. If that was all I focused on, it would be a really boring dud of a lecture. But if my objective is also to keep them involved and interested and I'm thinking about the issue of being able to take notes on this, I get at the whole issue of clarity.

Some other ways to do it. Number one, and I know people don't like to hear it, is to limit the concepts you present. There's only so much information that people can take. Decide what the key concepts are that you want the people to take away from that period and to center everything around it. If I have five concepts in a fifty minute period that means my examples, my statistics, everything in my lecture is driving towards those concepts. When they walk out of that place, number one they have been listening and hopefully they remember something about it. Now, if I'm willing to delineate what the main points of my message are going to be then I'm halfway home. Before I even begin to speak I can tell you what they are. I can preview my main points at the beginning - what I want you take away from this lecture is blah, blah, blah. I put it out in the beginning and suddenly the mystery is gone and they can begin to understand what's going to come, and when people have that kind of skeleton outline it's easier to hang the rest of the details on.

Then there's something called stylized redundancy which means that if it's a main concept I want to tell it to you a few different times and in different ways. So I need to think of ways to stylize my redundancy. Another way to increase clarity is through internal summaries. If you have a lecture with five main points, it's really not a good idea to wait until the end to summarize. After the first couple of points summarize and add a point or two and summarize. You want to be sure your students are grounded before moving on to another area. Internal summaries are a way of saying to our students, "This is where we've been, this is where we are and here's where we're headed." It's a secure feeling for both of you knowing that things are right on track.

One more thing that people can use are what I call cue words. Cue words are the single most listened to parts of speech and they are content free. They are things like "What this really boils down to is" or "What I'm really trying to get at is..." They are words that say, "Listen to what I'm about to say." Cue words almost more than anything else really snap people to it. It's almost a reflex. Other cue words might be - "My first point...", "What really matters is...", "Something I want you to take away today", "If you forget everything else", "I want you to remember".

One other thing you can do to get to this issue of clarity, is to reiterate in the conclusion the main points. It gives students a wonderful sense of security that you have told them what's important and they have it in their notes.

One thing I started doing two years ago is prepare a conclusion for the end of the course. It's usually about ten minutes long. I go through my notes and tell them the most important themes of this course. It gives people a feeling of stability.

So what we've just talked about there are a number of ways to give clarity to a lecture. It's not enough to have only interest. It's not enough to have only clarity. Somehow bringing them both together is the essence of what makes a really highly energized and highly informative lecture. A lecture where people listen to it and they remember it and understand.

Once we have a lecture that's interesting and involving, clear and understandable, we're still

brought to this one other issue which is feeling tense as opposed to feeling relaxed. This is a real interest area of mine. I've been doing research on shyness and communication anxiety for the seven years.

One of the things that's important to me in terms of anxiety and lecturing is not thinking it shouldn't be there. Probably the most important thing to me is knowing that anxiety is not to be eliminated, it's to be managed. In fact I like to think of anxiety as a motor - it generates, it keeps me going. You show me a teacher with no anxiety and I'll show you a teacher who is just kind of there. There's something about being a little anxious that's positive. On the other hand, sometimes anxiety takes over and distorts the message. I think that one of the main things to think about with regard to anxiety is to not try to eliminate. I can honestly say that if I'm feeling no anxiety, I get a cup of coffee to give myself that artificial feeling. The second most important part about managing anxiety is to be prepared. And another one is to act yourself into new ways of feeling rather than to feel yourself into new ways of acting. When you're feeling anxious, visualize yourself and calm and energized and act that way or visualize someone else who looks like that and act them out. It is absolutely possible to act yourself into new ways of feeling. When I'm too anxious I move too quickly and talk too quickly. So when I act myself out of it, I just simply slow down my motions. I keep one hand firmly planted on something and speak more slowly. One thing I learned in working with shy, communication apprehensive people is that it's much easier to pretend that you're not apprehensive and then let the feelings follow. It's hard to work on feelings, but it's easy to work on actions.

There's also the issue of implosion. With this technique you flood yourself with situations in teaching until finally you feel okay about it. So one thing I'm recommending is that if you're prepared and you can act your way into your feelings, just hit yourself up with those kinds of situations. Another possibility is to do some relaxation therapy. There are a lot of people who do it and a lot of tapes you can buy that pair muscle relaxation with feared objects.

Finally, ask yourself - what is the worst that can happen and then come up with an answer. The worst for me was a few years ago when Peter and I did the keynote for L.C.C. to all the returning faculty and we didn't know until moments before presenting that this was a presentation that they had had before. I can't remember what we said to start it out, but we weren't even two minutes into the program when this guy right in the center raises his hand and stands up and says, "You're talking about communication, but isn't it really manipulation." And I thought, well, thank you very much. And I wasn't sure exactly what to say. It wasn't one of the most sterling moments in my memory, but what I finally said was, "I really want to thank you for asking that question because my guess is that if that's really unclear to you, then there must be other people in here that have that same feeling and let me try and make that clear." In my mind I was thinking - you stupid creep, how could you stop me two minutes into my presentation? Whenever I'm nervous I really think about that because there's no one else in the universe like that guy. And besides I took care of it and lived through it.

Finally, I believe that we can get into the feeling of anxiety as a rare opportunity for high emotional charging and in the end how often do academics get that chance to get a high emotional charge. So all else being equal I think that we can kind of gravitate towards anxiety. Great feeling, glad I had the chance to feel charged.

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