

Anatomy of a Lecture

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This article is based on a Graduate Teacher Program workshop conducted by Dennis Van Gerven and on a personal interview with Professor Van Gerven held by Ken Battle, former GTP assistant.

Professor Dennis Van Gerven believes the attitude of a professor during classroom lectures directly affects the quality of the educational process of undergraduate students. His thesis rests on 12 years of teaching anthropology on the Boulder campus. He begins discussing his philosophy of teaching with a description of the "lecture as a performance."

The greater part of lecturing, small seminars excepted, he says, is "standing upon a stage in front of a group of people. The expectation is that they face us, that they be quiet, unless they are asked or allowed to participate. And we perform. To say that a lecture is not a performance is ludicrous."

The effective presentation of a lecture hinges on, of course, effective preparation. First, a professor must be "clear on the goals of the lecture," for example, increasing students' problem-solving abilities, relaying knowledge from one context to another, improving their communication skills, and so on.

Second, a professor must ask, "What kind of (student) response do I hope to create?" Discussion, critical analysis, comparison and contrast are among the several possibilities.

Third, Van Gerven advises professors to "avoid the zeal to pack every minute of lecture with new information; an effective lecture can at best contain three major points." A lecture that contains more than this tends to overwhelm students.

The lecture, however, is a two-way process. "There is the giver (professor) of the material and the receiver (students) of the material. Although instructors may effectively manage the content of the lecture material, their efforts will have been misspent if the class has not taken adequate notes." Van Gerven attempts to enhance the quality of students' note-taking by emphasizing important points of the lecture.

He signals information that should be noted with "attention getters," such as "Get this!" or "What I am about to tell you, this word here will be question number three on your exam!" or "Stop what you are fantasizing and daydreaming about and write this down!" Van Gerven says his behavior "makes them (the students) laugh; it startles them awake; they write it down; they remember it."

He also attempts to improve the quality of students' note-taking by doing "outrageous things." He recalls lecturing on "the anatomy of walking, which dealt with how muscles and bones work and how the shape of the bones of the human skeleton relate to how we move about."

During the lecture, Van Gerven wanted to demonstrate the anatomy of walking, but there was a problem. Because he is 5 feet 4 inches tall, students could not see him except for his bald head, standing behind the podium in Hellems 252, a large lecture hall. As a solution, Van Gerven jumped up on a table and proceeded to show the class what is involved in the anatomy of walking.

In demonstrating this, he unintentionally almost walked off the end of the table. "The class found the incident very humorous." But, more importantly, "everyone got that material right on the exam."

An enthusiastic attitude is essential to an effective teaching performance. A professor's enthusiasm about the course material often transmits to the students. It does not matter what the course is; literature, statistics, history. "After two years of teaching, a professor's challenge is not so much the preparation of a lecture. He or she has the relevant facts at hand. Rather, the problem of preparation is motivation." The key to maintaining an enthusiastic attitude is generating new angles and ways of viewing the subject-matter. Van Gerven, for example, reviews comprehensive notes before each lecture and rewrites them so that the words and ideas remain fresh.

Van Gerven also discusses a professor's attitude toward his presence in the classroom. Professors sometimes assume attitudes that detract from their teaching performance. For example, a professor may wonder, "What do they (the students) think of me?" "Do they think I'm really smart?" "Will the class find the material interesting?"

The problem with these preoccupations is that an instructor may assume a defensive posture in the classroom, and thus introduce course-work with expressions such as: "I know you won't like this, but. . ." "I know you're not going to find this interesting, but. . ." According to Van Gerven, this attitude can only be described as "condescending."

In assessing one's performance, Van Gerven believes the most important question is "whether or not I am teaching effectively." Effective teaching occurs when a professor establishes a "bridge of communication" with the class. This bridge can be created by showing respect for and an interest in students. Equally important, a professor must be honest with students if the bridge of communication is to be realized. Van Gerven believes his teaching experiences bear this out.

Early during a semester, he observed a boy and girl playing "touchy-feely"; another student was reading a newspaper in the back of the room. Because these problems grew progressively worse, Van Gerven suddenly stopped the lecture. He then offered the following analogy: "Imagine yourself making love to someone you love a great deal. This is a man or woman who matters as much to you as anyone in the world. But right in the middle of making love to this person, you notice that your lover is sneaking a glance at a newspaper."

He asked: "How would you feel?"

At this point, the class erupted with laughter, but Van Gerven persisted with the question. The students finally answered that they would feel "angry" and "humiliated."

Van Gerven then completed the analogy: "I love you guys (the students). I love teaching. I prepare, I come in here, and it matters to me. And then I look out there and have to look at some kid play 'touchy-feely' with his girlfriend or (see someone) reading the student newspaper while I am giving it my all."

After the lecture, students approached Van Gerven and said in various ways that "they never thought of teachers as human beings." For the remainder of the semester, he did not have problems with distracted students. This example also demonstrates to Van Gerven that students are always reading the attitude of a professor.

Once a professor establishes a bridge of communication with the class, students tend to support his efforts. For example, a professor may give a "flawed performance." Students, however, usually will not care if a professor errs in preparing his notes. Nor will they be disturbed if a professor has to repeat a point because his first effort was "confused."

Rather, if students believe a professor is giving his all, that the professor is enthusiastic about the material, that the professor likes them well enough to share the material with them, things can still go wrong and yet be corrected more easily."

Conversely, given Van Gerven's experiences, if a professor enters a class "stiff-as-a-board," with that "I-don't-want-to-be-here-look," or if he or she is obviously uncomfortable," the students' attitude may reflect: "Well, the hell with you too!"

Finally, Van Gerven addresses the attitude of graduate part-time instructors and teaching assistants. First, "one of the hardest things for graduate instructors to learn is that you can't always play on your top string." It is natural to feel nervous or a little insecure about what you may know. However, an instructor must not overcompensate by presenting the class or recitation with everything he or she knows about a subject-matter. This is intimidating, especially for first-year students.

Playing on your top string here may have the negative effect of arresting the educational process for students. An instructor who tailors the coursework to the level of the students' preparation tends to enhance their learning experience. And, according to Van Gerven, "that really does involve playing on a lower string."

Second, Van Gerven urges graduate instructors who intend to seek professorships to honestly confront their attitudes toward teaching early in their graduate studies. He believes that the main criterion for effective teaching is that one must enjoy it. He says, "teaching workshops may improve certain skills, but they cannot substitute the enjoyment of teaching."

Instruction is a major part of a research professor's responsibilities. But some graduate students, he observes, "are often well along in their program before addressing this issue. . . .Some graduate students discover that they really do not like teaching."

Van Gerven advises these people to pursue "alternative careers," because, as professors, they can do "severe damage" to the quality of undergraduate students' education and to themselves.