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The Anatomy of a Lecture

by Ken Battle

This article is based on a Graduate Teacher Program workshop conducted by Dennis Van Gerven, Department of Anthropology, and on a personal interview with Professor Van Gerven.

Professor Dennis Van Gerven believes the attitude of a professor as performer directly affects the quality of the educational process of undergraduate students. His thesis rests on 12 years of teaching anthropology at CU-Boulder. Van Gerven, who is animated and intense, speaks in a medium-pitched staccato voice. He begins discussing his philosophy of teaching with a metaphorical description of the "anatomy of a lecture."

"Like an organism, a lecture has parts. There is the giver (professor) of the material and the receiver (students) of the material." Given the role of the professor in this scenario, "the lecture is constructed 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."

Van Gerven's unit of analysis is the lecture hour. First, a professor must be "clear on the goals of the lecture," for example, increasing students' problem-solving abilities, translating 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, and compare-and-contrast are among the several possibilities.

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

Although professors may effectively manage the content of the lecture material, their efforts 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 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 (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 was 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 important, "everyone got that material right on the exam."

If it is not apparent, according to Van Gerven, an enthusiastic attitude is essential to an effective teaching performance. "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 the words and ideas remain fresh.

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The TUTOR welcomes articles written by graduate students, by staff, and by faculty. Articles are limited to 1000 words and should discuss pertinent aspects of the role of the graduate teacher. Send manuscripts to THE TUTOR, University Learning Center, Willard Administrative Center 309, Boulder, Colorado, 80309-0107.

Lecture *continued*

As a result, when a professor is enthusiastic about the course material, this often transmits to the students. It does not matter what the course is—such enthusiasm can be communicated in any academic discipline, be it physics, literature, statistics, or history.

Van Gerven also discusses a professor's attitude toward his or her presence in the classroom. Professors sometimes assume attitudes that detract from their teaching performance. For example, a professor may ask, "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 a professor may assume a defensive posture in the classroom.

This is exemplified when a professor introduces coursework 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 as a professor, Van Gerven believes the most important question is whether or not one is teaching effectively. Effective teaching, however, occurs when a professor establishes a "bridge of communication" with the class. A professor can help create lines of communication with students by showing respect for and an interest in them.

But, equally important, a professor must make every effort to be honest with students if a bridge of communication is to be realized. Van Gerven believes his teaching experiences bear this out.

Early during one 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, a sensitive man, 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 they are 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 that semester, he did not have problems with distractive students. Implicit, if not explicit, in this is Van Gerven's awareness 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 that a professor is giving his or her 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," he or she is "obviously uncomfortable." In turn, students' attitudes may reflect: "Well, the hell with you too!"

When addressing the attitude of graduate part-time instructors and teaching assistants, Van Gerven states "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. This is intimidating—especially for first-year students. "Playing on your top string" may have the negative effect of arresting the educational process for students.

But, 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." 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 first *attitude* toward effective teaching is that one must enjoy it, and the first *requirement* for effective teaching is that one must enjoy it.

Parenthetically, he says workshops on teaching may improve certain skills, but they cannot substitute for the first attitude, namely, "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 programs 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 as well.

□ Ken Battle is a graduate student in Journalism and is a graduate assistant to The Graduate Teacher Program.

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Graduate Student Award Recipients

Each year the Graduate School awards ten awards for Excellence in Teaching to graduate part-time instructors on the UCB campus, as well as ten awards to graduate students for research and creative work. We would like to congratulate the graduate students who received awards from the Graduate School Spring Semester 1987.

Name: Roger Little
Department: Pharmacy
Education: B.A. in EPOB from CU, finishing my Ph.D. here

Plans after graduation:

I have a postdoctoral appointment at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

Teaching or research experience:

I taught for a lecture section on heavy metal toxicity and gave several of the lectures. I also put on two two-week workshops for pharmacy faculty and staff—one on statistics, the other on immunologic techniques.

Opinion of CU undergraduates:

I think they've changed since I was one. More emphasis is now put on grades—they seem only to be interested in grades and what's going to be on the test.

Most memorable experience as a teacher at CU:

As a teacher having faculty members in my workshops was interesting because they were hands-on workshops and the faculty were what you might call "all left hands!"

What do you think makes a good teacher?

For me, it's important to cover the topics thoroughly and to have an approach that integrates several disciplines into the presentation.

How do you see yourself as a teacher?

As a young, learning teacher, I'm striving for that "good teacher" status.

Describe your research.

I received an award for my dissertation research on an enzyme in mice as well as for using my position on the Graduate Committee to develop departmental workshops in new research techniques and methodology.

What relationship do you see between research and good teaching at the university level?

In one word, I'd say that it's symbiotic.

Name: Christine Dziadecki
Department: Fine Arts
Education: B.A. in Elementary Education, M.A. in Special Education, and an M.A. in Fine Arts in photography and drawing.

Teaching experience:

I've been teaching at CU for five years. I came back to be a premed student, took a photo class for rest and recreation, and changed my major. I had to make up my undergraduate photography classes before applying to do my master's.

At CU, I taught photography in the Sewall Hall program when I was still classified as an undergraduate. Then, I became a GPTI in the department and have taught beginning photography and advanced beginning photography.

Opinion of CU undergraduates:

I really enjoy them; I'm going to miss teaching them.

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TOOTER'S TEACHING TIPS



1. To avoid having the same students answer, keep names on a set of 3x5 cards; reshuffle the cards regularly to assure a random distribution.
2. When asking questions, never allow students to get off the hook, get them to shape an appropriate response.
3. Treat any student's questions as legitimate.

Phil Langer, Education

Awards continued

Most memorable experience as a teacher at CU:

One semester a lot of death and suicide themes kept coming up. I decided to take my class to the cemetery for a photo session from 10:00-11:00 p.m. Fifteen people showed up at that time of night! It was so dark it took 10 minutes to get an exposure. They were great. They shared flashes, tripods, flashlights, etc., so people could try to get something on their film. It was a scream!

What do you think makes a good teacher?

I'm going to speak to the fine arts aspect of this, because in art you can't come in, do a lecture and leave. It's important to be able to figure out what the students want, which entails knowing them. It's crucial to be able to separate your own work from what they are. You don't want to create clones of yourself. I have students do a self-portrait piece which they have to grade. They have to tell me why they deserve the grade. It really helps them figure out what they're after.

The craft of teaching is to get students to find their own way.

How do you see yourself as a teacher?

Invested. As an artist I get a great deal out of teaching. My interaction with the students has a great deal to do with what I put into my own work.

I treat them as people and give them a break here and there. I feel I've done a lot if at the end of the semester my students have matured emotionally and creatively. Artists have to deal with who they are emotionally before they can move forward in their art. But, even though I'm a teacher, I'm an artist first.

Describe your creative work.

My own work is self-portrait work.

What relationship do you see between research and good teaching at the university level?

In art, you have to be in contact with your own work to be a good teacher. If you aren't, you lose sight of what it is to create. I don't believe you can teach art unless you make art.

GRADUATE TEACHER FORUM



Comments on GTP Workshops:

"I enjoyed the discussion of grading, how to be prepared, how to help students learn."

"The most helpful part of the workshops was the practical information on what to do and what not to do from a teaching/learning perspective."

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TO ALL:
Graduate Part-Time Instructors
Teaching Assistants
Research Assistants
Faculty