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HOW TO IMPROVE CLASSROOM LECTURES

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The offer to improve classroom lectures is, I am aware, an audacious undertaking. So that we may get on common ground I wish to make two preliminary observations.

The first is that I am not here concerned with the content of classroom lectures. The way to improve what is said in classroom lectures is to read widely, to conduct research, to exchange views with colleagues at staff seminars and professional meetings, to reflect, and to write. The content of lectures should improve as the teacher's knowledge becomes broader and deeper. If a teacher becomes an original thinker about his subject matter, the content of his lectures will not only improve, but may become brilliant. Yet because there is truth in the campus comment frequently heard, “He knows but he cannot teach,” it is profitable for all teachers to consider ways of improving the presentation of subject matter.

This brings me to the second observation, namely, that the teacher should always ask himself this question, “Is the lecture the best way of presenting the subject matter to students?” Would it be better to plan a field trip, set up a demonstration, use slides or motion pictures, conduct a discussion, have four or five bright students present a panel, or even write out the materials and distribute them in mimeographed form? Even in courses where the lecture is traditional, the lecturer may use a different procedure for the sake of variety. The lecture is not the only way of transmitting information; in many instances it is not even the best way. This paper, accordingly, is further limited to those situations in which the lecture has a fair chance of success.

Any group of teachers could sit down and list the many ways in which classroom lecturing can be improved. The list would include such arts of language as vocabulary, imagery, syntax, paral-
lelism, repetition; such matters of organization as preview, subordination, transition, climax, summary; such principles of delivery as voice quality, rate of utterance, general physical energy, and animation. As the list grew, the possibility of improving lectures would seem more and more likely. This paper will discuss four categories of improvement chosen in part from personal observation and in part from informal interviews with seventy-five students who have received college instruction on twenty different campuses.

The Lecturer's Personality

In his Rhetoric, Aristotle states that the speaker's character is one of his most effective agents of persuasion. Listeners believe men of good sense, good moral character, and goodwill more readily than they do men of opposite traits. When I asked students, "What are the characteristics of the best classroom lectures that you have heard?" or "What are the reasons explaining why certain lectures are ineffective?" the answers often reflected opinions about the character and personality of the lecturer.

The good lecturer, these students pointed out, shows that he has the interest of his listeners at heart. At the beginning of the lecture, for example, good teachers use various methods of arousing the interest of their students. Instead of plunging coldly into the topic, the lecturer might open by commenting upon a chapel talk that all had heard. He might refer to some campus or national incident. He might mention a pertinent clipping that he had run across, or a new book he had received. He might begin with a summary or forecast. He might tell a story. All of these methods start the students to thinking, in as painless a way as possible, about the subject before the group. Some of my informants had observed that experienced teachers were more likely to do these things than were younger faculty members. The younger teachers, they reported, are often more serious, solemn, formal, dignified; they are more likely to open up all their big guns promptly at the ringing of the bell.

The personality of the lecturer is further shown by the way he answers questions. A good teacher welcomes questions from the floor and answers them with completeness, often bringing in rare
details that otherwise might not have come into the discussion at all. The student naturally feels pleased to have his question treated with so much respect. A few teachers seem unhappy when a question is asked, blurt out such brief and inadequate answers that students hate to offend by further inquiries. Some teachers say, in chilling tones, “I discussed that last hour.” Others use the familiar dodge, “I’ll take that up later on.” In some instances, “later on” may actually be the logical time to consider the question; but experienced teachers know that important items can be successfully repeated two or three times anyway, and the question provides a good motivation for one of the repetitions. Furthermore, the lecturer receives more credit from his students for being able to handle a question on the spot than to take it up later after he has looked up the answer.

In many lesser ways a teacher can show good will towards his listeners. It may help if he says, “Now this is a complex principle; I’m going to try to make it clear, but I want you to feel free to ask questions about any point that you do not understand.” It shows good spirit for him to say, “We’ve had to spend a long time on this classification, but another half hour will see us over the worst of it.” Or his personality may express itself in entirely different ways; instead of using gentleness and patience, he may use humor, challenge, praise, mock seriousness, or some other approach.

Sometimes students are embarrassed when the teacher begins his lecture by apologizing for his shortcomings. The chairman of the, let us say, Sanskrit department, who has grown white-haired in the pursuit of knowledge and who has achieved renown for his scholarship, may in all truth open a class by saying, “I do not know anything about Sanskrit.” Such a declaration would express the humility that comes to a scholar who has long pursued a difficult topic. It may even mark him as a man of wisdom and distinction. If, however, a beginning instructor makes such a statement, students will take it at face value and wonder why they are so unfortunate as to have to study under an ignoramus. A teacher need not reveal the full scope of his ignorance on the first day of the course; he may at least assure his students that he is interested in the subject, that he intends to give them personal attention, that
he invites them freely to express their questions and difficulties.

If teachers will treat a student exactly as they would a colleague, they will have the proper mental attitude for good lecturing. If one thinks of his listeners as fellow scholars he is less likely to scold, nag, heckle, bait, or patronize them.

The Use of Examples

Illustrations, anecdotes, specific instances, and practical applications all add to the effectiveness of a lecture. One student mentioned a professor of philosophy who had a large fund of examples to illustrate faults of reasoning and types of propaganda. Another mentioned a professor of history who frequently exemplified his points by parallel incidents from other centuries or countries. Another mentioned a professor of language who had at the tip of his tongue instances of all sorts of grammatical constructions. Another described a freshman English instructor with a ready supply of unusual ways of beginning themes, developing paragraphs, and ending themes. Another told of a scientist and his stock of interesting intellectual curiosities. Another related how a professor of sociology chose illustrations from many different trades and industries.

Academic circles give their widest applause to the professor who can discover great generalizations: new laws, principles, concepts, interpretations, theories. I recall a professor of Anglo-Saxon who with some feeling told a graduate seminar that he would consider his life on earth well spent if he could discover a linguistic principle as significant as Grimm's law. Although students appreciate the generalizations, they are particularly intrigued by the specific examples. They are beginners, not practitioners. The margin of knowledge between them and their teachers is very great. Largely through the examples do they learn to appreciate the generalizations.

Humorous examples have a special appeal for the student. The opportunity to laugh gives him a chance to relax and tackle anew the serious instruction to follow. Yet the use of humor can be overdone. Students may laugh from 10:00 to 10:50, then at 10:55 complain that the lecturer is just an entertainer who doesn't really teach anything. A teacher may get such a reputation for humor
that no one will take him seriously. The best type of humor is that which grows naturally out of the subject—a turn of phrase or a flash of wit that illuminates a subject without distracting from it.

Improving Delivery

The students I interviewed did not seem especially sensitive to matters of bodily action. Posture and gesture did not impress them, though they noted the difference between an animated, dynamic lecturer and a lethargic one. They were, however, aware of the lecturer's voice, especially when it was not loud enough. Inexperienced teachers holding forth in large lecture rooms sometimes have difficulty in making themselves heard. The student wearies of the constant strain of hearing, and soon loses interest altogether. One teacher answered complaints by this statement: "I am glad that you have to exert yourselves in order to hear me. That extra exertion will make you give special attention to what I am saying." A lecturer with the interest of his students at heart, however, will try to speak distinctly and with sufficient volume to be heard.

To improve audibility is not a simple problem. The teacher may need clinical advice about his voice. The institution may need to study the acoustic qualities of its physical plant. If colleges and universities are to have permanently large enrollments, with the resulting necessity for large classes, they must give acoustic treatment to lecture rooms and in some instances they will need to install sound-amplifying systems.

Clear enunciation, the distinctness with which words are uttered, is another prime requisite of good delivery. "Be sure to tell the teachers to watch their pronunciation and enunciation," said one student. My interviewees did not appear to be distressed by regional dialects or foreign accents except when comprehension was difficult. What especially worried them was carelessness, slovenliness, and indistinctness. They praised highly the speech of some lecturers, but registered no strong complaint about others so long as they met respectable standards of agreeability and distinctness. Anything below the minimum standard reduces
effectiveness at an alarming rate—may, in fact, bring it almost to the zero point.

**Forms of Presentation**

Lectures may be delivered impromptu, from notes or outlines, from manuscript, from memory, or from various combinations of the above. Impromptu and memorized presentations will not be considered. The former are too hazardous; as the lawyers say, those who go into court empty-handed will come out empty-handed. The latter are rare; few teachers go so far as to write out their lectures and commit them to memory.

My interviewees had little objection to the use of notes or outlines. They realized that instructors have to present a great deal of factual material, complicated organizations and classifications, and intricate tables and formulas, and that accuracy is of first importance. They agreed, however, that an instructor can be unduly chained to his notes. They did not appear to be especially distressed when the lecturer spends considerable time dictating materials, though if verbatim dictation is carried on too long they began to wonder why he did not mimeograph his ideas. They liked to have the teacher sufficiently free from his notes so that he could answer questions without keeping his finger on his place.

Of the various methods of presentation, the students I questioned had least sympathy with the practice of reading from manuscript. Although they had heard lecturers on many campuses, they did not recall a single instance of a teacher who read lectures effectively. Yet teachers do not have to ask their students for proof that the reading of lectures is usually ineffective. Every one has attended conventions or convocations where what might have been an enjoyable occasion was ruined when the speaker pulled a manuscript out of his pocket. Monotonous vocal pattern, fixed facial expression, and general lack of energy and animation nearly always seem to accompany the reading of a paper.

Theoretically there is little reason why good lectures cannot be read interestingly. A few ministers, like Fosdick, read from manuscript with uncommon skill. A few political speakers, like Churchill, have the ability to bring typed words to life. But the art of reading well is more difficult than the art of speaking well.
The instructor who begins his teaching career by reading his lectures is less likely to develop a successful speaking style than one who begins by using notes or outlines, gradually training his memory and developing his fluency so that he can communicate more and more directly to his students.

Two prerequisites to good reading often escape the teacher. One is that the vocabulary, the sentence structure, and the organization of the lecture should be adapted to oral presentation. Sentences should be simple, language vivid and striking, and organization clear. The general tone should be more informal than that of the scholarly essay. A good way to prepare such a lecture is to follow the practice of the late President Roosevelt and dictate it to a secretary. Such a procedure will tend to assure that the language will be the language of speaking rather than the language of writing. The next step is to revise and re-revise the stenographer’s transcript—manuscripts of Churchill and Roosevelt have gone through six to twenty revisions, each revision trying to make the wording more clear, colorful, and meaningful. There is some truth in the statement of Charles James Fox that a good speech does not read well. The speaker aims at something that listens well, not at something for the academic journals.

The second prerequisite is that the reader must so present his ideas as to show that he is actually recreating the thought as he goes along. An incident from the long speaking career of the late President Roosevelt illustrates this principle. On October 29, 1940, he explained to the country over the radio how the Selective Service Act was to be put into operation. The occasion was the drawing of blue capsules from the large glass bowl in the House of Representatives to determine the order in which the young men of the nation would be called to service. In the course of his address, Roosevelt read these words:

And of the more than 16,000,000 names which will come out of the bowl more than half of them will soon know that the government does not require their service.

Then he paused; something in the sentence did not make sense to him; and in a moment he continued:
I made a mistake there—I’m afraid it’s the fault of the copy—of the more than 1,600,000 instead of 16,000,000 . . .

There had been some talk of “16,000,000” earlier in the speech; but just now the correct figure was “1,600,000.” One who read mechanically would not have noticed that a mistake had been made. By contrast, one of the announcers on the same program was assigned the responsibility of reading the numbers over the microphone as fast as they were drawn from the bowl. The nineteenth number drawn—105—was his own draft number, but he did not realize he had read his own draft number until afterwards when a colleague commented upon it.

The good reader is keenly aware of the significance and meaning of what he is reading. The poor reader follows his manuscript word for word, giving the impression that if a student interrupted him and said, “Professor, what does that last sentence mean?” the lecturer would have to go back and reread the paragraph—this time with awareness of content—before he could answer the question.

**Invite Student Comments**

Although the real test of a lecturer’s effectiveness is measured by the lasting quality of his instruction—the impressions, recollections, and habits of thinking that persist years after graduation—the opinions of students at the time they take the course are valuable. Some teachers hand out questionnaires at the time of the final examination, inviting frank comments. One way is to list the titles of typical lectures, and to ask the students whether each one was poor, average, or good; or whether it should be expanded, deleted, or left unchanged.

Last summer, at a military university, I sat across a discussion table from an army instructor who followed this procedure religiously. His first set of questionnaires, he said, contained many brutal criticisms. “This lecture stinks,” said one student-officer, “this one stinks too; in fact, they all stink.” “Where did they find you?” wrote a second. About fifty such comments led the instructor to feel that his lectures were not very satisfactory. He found a few helpful clues in the avalanche of ridicule, conferred
with some of his more successful colleagues, and did a little private soul-searching. He showed me the returns from his last set of questionnaires; many of them were quite commendatory. He planned to study that set with intellectual detachment, trying to discover still other avenues of improvement.

Attending a good classroom lecture is a thrilling experience. It is stimulating to sit in the back of an auditorium and observe a good lecturer who by force of his personality, the vigor and originality of his ideas, and the clarity and animation of his presentation arouses the interest and intellectual curiosity of two or three hundred students. The favorable comments of students heard in the hallways following such a lecture are understandably gratifying. The results of effective lecturing are great as regards both educational welfare and personal satisfaction. The improvement of classroom lectures is a worth-while objective for any of us.

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Errata in Summer, 1948 Bulletin

In the address, "The Case against a National Science Foundation," by Theodore Koppanyi, page 309, line 5, substitute "The Failure of the German Universities," for "The Failure of the Franco-Prussian War."

In the article, "The College President as He Is Today," by B. W. Kunkel, page 348, 3rd line from bottom, and page 349, line 2, substitute Wooster for Worcester.