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Oliviers of the lecture theatre

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Abstract

Recognise the quote? Hamlet is attempting to ensure the Player's performance before the King will be of sufficient quality to entrap the murderer into revealing his guilt. These lines are often used as salutary advice for every actor but, taken further out of context, they may be applied to lecturers whatever the size of their class.

In 1992 the Centre for Staff Development organised seminars entitled "Lecturing in Large Spaces" to assist lecturers to make more effective use of the Hope Theatre, a much larger and more daunting venue than had previously been available at the University of Wollongong. They invited members of the Theatre Strand, School of Creative Arts to contribute: the following paper developed from material prepared for those seminars.

Oliviers of the Lecture Theatre

"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines..... Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action....." 1

Ian McGrath

Recognise the quote? Hamlet is attempting to ensure the Player's performance before the King will be of sufficient quality to entrap the murderer into revealing his guilt. These lines are often used as salutary advice for every actor but, taken further out of context, they may be applied to lecturers whatever the size of their class.

What is our purpose in lecturing? Are we *town-criers*, merely 'talking books' or perhaps dictators of notes? Is there something lecturers might learn from Hamlet's advice? Should a lecture entertain its audience in an attempt to retain their interest or, rather, should we use the skills of a performer to better communicate our material to students?

We have all attended lectures where monotone delivery and seeming lack of interest in their topic from the lecturer has suffocated our own enthusiasm and, perhaps, even stunted our desire for knowledge. In these situations the gardener weeding the flowerbed outside the window demands our attention more, despite the probable eminence of the lecturer. However, I recall with immense pleasure lectures by Peter Mason at the University of N.S.W. and I'm sure each of you has similar memories. Something more than authority in a topic is required to ensure a satisfying lecture experience.

Seminarists at "Lecturing in Large Spaces" may have attended in the hope that we 'theatrical types' would be able to give them some magical formula, some tricks of the trade that instantly turned them into "Oliviers of the lecture theatre". Unfortunately, that is not possible; Olivier's career was built upon hard work and a grasp of his craft that had less to do with 'tricks' (i.e. gesture or inflection) but a great deal to do with deliberate manipulation of his onstage intentions and feelings to create a character.

We were and are not interested in creating lecture theatre 'characters'. You are not only the lecturer but also the character and the actor rolled into one - it is **your** intentions and feelings that must project to an audience by careful manipulation of your own force of will. However, the difficulties and responsibilities faced in lecturing to large bodies of students year in and year out are precisely those of the actor in a long running show : that is, to make every performance as fresh, spontaneous and 'heart-felt' as our first and for each to be subtly better than the last.

That may sound like a tall order but imagine the nightmares of poor actors whose livelihood depends upon making the most banal, trashy dialogue sound fresh and spontaneous; your task is so much easier since the material is already close to your heart. The problem for a lecturer, therefore, becomes one of keeping the 'performance' fresh and delivering it in a manner that reaches every member of their audience.

The skill of an actor rests not in plucking inspiration from the air nightly but rather in deliberately analysing a performance in such detail that they are able to reproduce it with consistency and precision. Some of the

tools an actor brings to bear in this analytical process are: **motivation, action** (or intention) and **attitude**. By analysing the script and manipulating from within themselves the essential characteristics of the person they are portraying, a performer creates empathy in the minds of their audience. A lecturer has an advantage in using material they know intimately and in knowing they are working to an audience whose empathy with the topic is guaranteed; their confidence should be well founded. What they must manipulate is the motivation to recreate the lecture with the same passion and enthusiasm that once drove them to take up the challenge of education and to present it in such a way that students perceive not only the detail of the topic but also its value to them as beginning professionals.

I draw your attention to a recently published book² by Hayes Gordon which handles precisely these topics in infinitely greater detail than we need to consider here; however, it is recommended as further reading, if you feel so inclined. The following quotes are pertinent:

"The actor's feelings are his motivations, why he does what he does . What he does thinkingly, his deliberately, consciously, mentally chosen behaviours are his actions."

"A successfully composed action has four critically essential components:

- (1) .the action must stem from a feeling ... it's on the nature and strength of that feeling that an action is launched.
- (2) .a plan must be formed, before the action can begin to activate.
- (3) The action must be impinged onto a chosen object...
- (4) The action must have a clearly-specified objective. An action is designed to accomplish a goal..."³

The parallels to lecturing are obvious. A successful lecture needs to be planned carefully with specific educational goals; it must be carried to every member of the student group (using clear speech of sufficient volume, precise structure, appropriate aids, etc); finally, the energy with which the communication is infused must come from the feelings of the lecturer - that is, from his or her soul!

Before we teach any body of students, regardless of size, we must precisely define the following:

our feelings or **motivations:**

Are we lecturing simply for the

money or do we believe our students will benefit from what we have to share?

our action:

What are we trying to do to our students? Inform them, keep them occupied..... or, perhaps, to enthuse them, stimulate them, challenge them?

our objective:

What precisely do we aim to achieve? Can we maintain or, perhaps, improve the standing of our profession?

the object

of the action: On whom are we playing the action, on what is our attention focussed? The overhead projector, the microphone or the students in the back row? If we can effect those distant students, our reception throughout the remainder of the auditorium is assured.

our attitudes:

What do we feel for those students? Are you begrudging of your time or do you take satisfaction from seeing your students grow in academic and professional stature?

If we are able to generate these feelings and intentions afresh for every 'performance' (lecture) we will go a good way toward reaching each and every student, however distant they may be. If you are genuinely concerned that your students all receive the message your lecture contains, then you will want everyone to hear, see and perceive. Rather than struggle with the mechanics [notes and microphones], your perceptive resources [sight, hearing and even intuition] should reach out to the back row of the auditorium and ensure that the 'message' reaches its target in exactly the same way that a performer ensures that they retain their audience's interest and understanding.

The task of both performer and lecturer is to communicate with an audience our own joy in the subject, to meet the challenge of achieving insight in another's mind and to share a delight in rediscovery. In microcosm, my message to you is : a lecturer's

motivation is more important than the mechanics - solve the former and you are a long way to ensuring the latter.

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¹*Shakespeare "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" Act 3, Sc II*

²*Hayes Gordon "Acting and Performing"; Ensemble Press, Sydney, 1992*

³*Ibid p.51-52*

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