



SPEAKING OF TEACHING

STANFORD UNIVERSITY NEWSLETTER ON TEACHING

WINTER 2003 Vol.12, No. 3

Why Good Teachers Have Bad Classes: And What You Can Do About It

In this issue of *Speaking of Teaching*, we address the issue of why even the best, most knowledgeable teachers occasionally find themselves teaching a course that is just not working. In this introduction we propose several effective approaches to the problem, and then in the following pages listen to the reflections of one Stanford professor who found himself in a class that was not working. Finally we offer a list of excellent books that can help you avoid—or at least respond constructively to—a bad class.

Bad classes happen for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is the way the course has been organized—is it coverage-centered or learning-centered? Other times it seems that the traditional teaching methods—lecture and Socratic discussions—just don't engage students the way they used to. Sometimes students just don't do the reading...why is that? Much of the literature on effective teaching suggests that there are several important ways to approach the problem of a bad class: creating a sense of community and collaborative learning in the class, getting feedback about the course from your students early and throughout the term, varying your teaching methods, and bringing significant "active learning" moments into each class meeting.

More broadly speaking, however, the bad class can be approached from two intimately related directions. In her exceptionally useful book, *Tools for Teaching*, Barbara Davis suggests a student-centered approach of increasing motivation by getting students actively involved in generating the content of each class. Options range anywhere from designating students to be responsible for bringing in discussion questions to assigning short in-class writing assignments, to using debates, case studies, small group projects, and letting students have some say in choosing the course material. She writes, "Students learn by doing, making, writing, designing, creating, solving. Passivity dampens students' motivation and curiosity" (p. 194). This is true for undergraduate as well as graduate students. Even for large classes, Davis suggests in a chapter called "Supplements and Alternatives to Lecturing" that there are always ways to bring community and active learning into the classroom.

On the other side of the issue, a more teaching-centered approach is suggested by Wilbert McKeachie in his book, *McKeachie's Teaching Tips*. McKeachie encourages teachers to be continually open to learning about teaching, and to make extensive use of evaluative feedback from peers, students, faculty development specialists, and even from themselves. Whether by reading about teaching, attending workshops, talking to colleagues, or observing other teachers in action, McKeachie maintains that in order to know how to handle—and avoid—bad classes, our best resource is our own willingness to learn. He writes, in the chapter titled "Vitality and Growth throughout Your Teaching Career,"

Talking about teaching with colleagues can be an invaluable source of ideas as well as emotional support when a class hasn't gone well. The colleagues need not be in one's own discipline. You will often get interesting feedback from teachers in other disciplines. (p. 322)

McKeachie also strongly suggests that students should be offered the opportunity to provide course evaluation feedback early in the term so that changes can be made before the course is over. This one strategy—agreed on by virtually all pedagogical specialists—can go a long way toward helping a class that is not working.

Whether student-centered or teaching-centered, there are a wealth of resources and effective approaches available to the good teacher who wants to save a bad class; it could happen to anyone! ♦

Spring TA Orientation

Thursday, April 3, 2003

Landau Economics Building, 1-4pm
Conference Room A

No registration necessary
Refreshments will be served

For more information, contact:
TeachingCenter@stanford.edu

Confessions of a Bore

One honest Stanford professor, who asked to remain anonymous, submitted the following essay to CTL for this issue of Speaking of Teaching. We hope that his “confessions” will inspire our readers to explore the options we have outlined in this issue.

During some telephone conversations, there comes a moment when you realize that the connection has been cut off. Perhaps it is a silence from the other end that is just a little too long to be meaningful, or perhaps it is a lack of conviction in your own voice that causes you suddenly to note that the conversation is over (and has been for some time). Imagine that moment stretched into two-hour increments and repeating itself over ten weeks, and you have a recent episode in my life as a teacher.

With so many years of education behind me, I am naturally no stranger to boredom. One late afternoon in graduate school—I can recall the exact moment: it was deep in a seminar where the poor old professor had already spent hours charging down blind alleys alone and was just launching into another tunnel of soliloquy—I told myself that boring people was unpardonable, easily avoided (wouldn't it be enough just to stop the monologue, open a window and invite someone else to talk?), and swore to myself that when I got to be in the professor's position I would take it as my moral responsibility never to be a bore.

Fortunately there were no witnesses.

A moral responsibility? Committing dullness is a serious act, I thought then and still think, because you cause the listener to wish part of his or her life away, to be drawn toward an attenuated, granular form of suicide. Bores are torturers. The bore—or to specify further: the deadly bore—does something so dreadful to time that it would have been more merciful simply to kill it. The more vividly one holds in mind the preciousness and finitude of lived time, the less one can condone boring anyone for any reason. These reasonings imply that the bore knows he is being a bore. That may not always be the case. I could not be sure about the professor in that long-ago seminar, but if he didn't know, he was the more to be pitied. I supposed that a bore without self-aware-

ness was forgivable, but only because not entirely responsible; and someone as watchful as I would not have that excuse.

I do watch my audiences like a hawk. I know that what I have to tell them is not always what they got out of bed for. They may have to be amused and cajoled into listening. I set traps for attention, many kinds of traps for different kinds of attention. Jokes, metaphors, gestures, apostrophes, snatches of song, mimic voices, even the sluttish temptations of audio-visual and slide presentations—all are fair means. Eventually, or so I hope, the glow of polemic or the tight structure of a well-fashioned argument will by itself command attention. Facing an audience of a hundred, I keep a half-conscious running tally of the number of glazed eyes and averted faces, and should these rise much beyond ten or fifteen percent, I pull out the emergency measures: a dramatic change of topic, a knockdown argument in favor of the opposing side, even a little shouting and hand-waving to reawaken our memories of childhood punishments. Anything short of a fire alarm will do. We teachers are performers; our audiences tell us what we need to know about ourselves.

Or, sometimes, what we would rather not know. Given what I have said, you know that I have no excuse for being a bore: I don't approve of boredom, even on conditional grounds (the value of information imparted does not justify dullness in imparting it, though the perception of value may do away with the feeling of dullness), I know it when I see it, and I devote a lot of energy to watching for it and chasing it away. You should expect me to do anything in my power to avoid the failing I have just painted in such deeply moral colors (the torturing of time, the incitement to suicide by degrees). When you are being bored, the bore seems to be a perpetrator of some kind, the active force behind an offense; when you are the bore, it feels more like helplessness, like being marooned—on Easter Island, for

(continued on page three)

Confessions of Bore. . .(continued)

example. “Easter Island” is the name a friend of mine gives to the staring rows of stony, uncomprehending faces you sometimes see from the front of an amphitheater.

I noticed early on in the course I’m making my confession about (a seminar with seven graduate students) that the students had little to say. Were they just timid? If so, they must have been petrified, for the only reaction I could read from most of their faces was a fixed expression that could easily be interpreted as polite hostility; one or two of them regularly met my eyes and nodded, a little too mechanically to convince me that it betokened any strong form of assent. Were we all speaking the same language? Had anyone come to the class for a good reason, beyond the fact that the class was a degree requirement? *Maybe I’ll stop the didactic monologue and ask some questions*, I thought. *Help me, Socrates!* But a question thrown out into the air and not picked up eventually becomes a rhetorical question to which the questioner is expected to provide a response. Answering my own question returned me to the stream of my detestable patter. It went on and on. At the very least, I was going to complete the job the university pays me for, and fill out the whole two hours with verbal behavior from which someone might, other conditions being favorable, extract some knowledge.

To construe my verbal behavior as a performance would impel the conclusion that it was not a very successful performance. The audience response was lacking, or at any rate was not registering on the meters at my disposal. So it could not have been a performance. Rather, what I was doing was extruding the required amount of verbal matter (two hours’ worth), and shaping it as best I could: a little antithesis here, a little personification allegory there, now and again a chiasmus or a hysteron-proteron. In short, I was talking to myself—unwillingly—and trying to disguise my own boredom with an engagement in the rhetorical materiality of the verbal flow, like a child adding up the numbers of license plates on a long drive.

The self-aware bore is a desperate creature. He is conscious of the offense he causes his hearers, conscious of his responsibility for it, and in the worst of cases unable to do anything about it. (I am a few years too young to simulate a heart attack and thus get out of the room.) While my mind raced about, seeking expedients, escapes and alternatives, my voice, reliable after years of practice in less trying situations, continued to emit a certain volume of verbiage under a certain pressure for a certain time (in obedience to a flow ratio established by centuries of academic precedent): and this volume, sculpt and twist it though I might, was, I knew, the very substance of boredom. Boredom fills the room, makes movement impossible, asphyxiates any alternative to itself. It is a painful thing to realize that one is the source of boredom, that dullness has taken one over, like a disturbing odor or an involuntary tic. Possession by devils would have been more exciting. One can only wish for it to be past, and if the audience will not help (my audience was too reserved, too passive or too hostile to try), the only horizon for its being over is the end of the quarter. That means taking the granular death-wish in large handfuls, and having enough left over at the end of class to carry it home.

If our species can feel boredom, there must be a purpose to it. Presumably the reaction is triggered by fruitless activity: those of our predecessors who persisted in looking for fishes in the treetops, and did not feel boredom, starved before passing on their genes. Boredom is the vast penumbra surrounding focus, attention and will; it defines itself relative to these three. But even given this proximity of dullness to more valuable mental powers, there is surely no need to teach people how to be bored: there is enough noise, enough pointlessness, enough waste already, and the very formlessness of these opposites of attention makes it doubtful whether they have a lesson in them that could not be taught equally well by a proportionate amount of time spent waiting in line or searching haystacks for needles. *(continued on page four)*

Confessions of a Bore. . .(conclusion)

An experienced and optimistic colleague of mine urged me to put the experience behind me. “It’s not your fault. You *are* a good teacher. Everyone can have a bad class. They were not ready for or receptive to what you had to say. You will go on to have better classes.” Perhaps. But having been an incorrigible, helpless bore for several weeks at a stretch makes it harder for me to hear identity-statements such as “you *are* a good teacher” as anything but well-meant mantra-chanting. The horror I felt on observing the spectacle of the helpless bore led me to draw a line between myself and the bores, a line which it was not in my power to maintain. Perhaps the stubbornness that made me continue with a class that was not working—that is, my determination not to be a bore, not to admit that I could be a bore—was the real villain of the piece. ♦

Useful Books for Improving Your Teaching

- Angelo, Thomas A., and Patricia Cross. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. 2nd edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- Banner, James, and Harold C. Cannon. *The Elements of Teaching*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Boice, Robert. *Advice For New Faculty Members*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.
- Brookfield, Stephen D. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- Christensen, C. Roland, David A. Garvin, and Ann Sweet, Eds. *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1991.
- Davis, Barbara Gross. *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
- Erickson, Bette LaSere, and Diane Weltner Strommer. *Teaching College Freshmen*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
- Feldman, Kenneth A., and Michael B. Paulsen, Eds. *Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom*. 2nd ed. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1998.
- Grunert, Judith. *The Course Syllabus: A Learning Centered Approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing, 1997.
- Light, Richard. *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Lowman, Joseph. *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*. 2nd edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- Mazur, Eric. *Peer Instruction: A User’s Manual*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- McKeachie, Wilbert J. *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 11th edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Speaking of Teaching is compiled and edited by CTL Associate Director Valerie Ross. Please feel free to contact Dr. Ross at varlet@stanford.edu with any questions, suggestions, or comments; thank you!

