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Voice in Teaching: Improving Your Classroom Connection

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Bob Schoofs

Voice in teaching

Improving your classroom connection

Teaching is becoming an increasingly large part of the regular work of academic librarians. The former occasional one-shot sessions trying to cover everything students need to know about the library are becoming less frequent. Instead, librarians are working with classroom faculty in planning and delivering targeted instruction at various times throughout the term. As librarians' teaching roles expand, the importance of improving our teaching skills increases. But how to we do this?

The problem

I was reviewing some student evaluations of my teaching at the end of the term. Most were pretty positive, but I was struck by one comment in particular. It pointed out that my voice was pretty boring. On the one hand, this was not news to me. I know I don't have the booming voice of a James Earl Jones. But on another level I was struck by the fact that here was an aspect of my teaching that I should certainly be able to improve. After all, even famous actors or singers must work on their voices. It must be that they improve not only their dynamics and expression, but also their durability so that they can sing a whole concert without getting a hoarse or raspy voice. I'm especially impressed by this since I have a particular problem with hoarseness when I teach two or three classes in the same morning.

Literature review

Since many other librarians face this

same issue, I began searching the library literature in hopes of finding some help. Although I found general articles for librarians about teaching, none addressed use of the voice specifically.¹

So I began searching the education literature, which proved to be much more fruitful. I discovered a number of helpful articles and books that discuss the importance of the use of the voice in teaching. They discuss ways to strengthen the voice so that it does not become hoarse so easily, as well as ways to become a more expressive, dynamic speaker to better connect with and engage your audience.²

Expert advice

I was excited to read these sources, but decided I also needed to consult with faculty members in relevant departments. I began by questioning faculty from the Education Department. Surely, I thought, use of the voice must be something that is taught to our future teachers, who will spend multiple hours every day using their voices in the classroom. But to my surprise I discovered that in fact this is *not* something that is addressed in standard education classes.

As Morton Cooper says, "The lack of vocal knowledge and training among teachers is extensive, yet accepted. Teachers are unaware that the human speaking voice can be trained."³ So it's not only librarians

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who teach who do not get training in use of the voice, but also teachers who spend the majority of their day in the classroom.

This results not only in ineffective teaching, but other problems as well: “Twenty percent of teachers have had to take time off work because of voice problems compared with a national average of 4 percent.”⁴

By now it was clear to me that I was dealing with a more pervasive issue than I had initially realized. I knew that most college professors are trained in their disciplines, but not in how to teach effectively. Many campuses, including my own, have faculty teaching centers that seek to address this lack of training by offering workshops and other assistance. I checked with my teaching center, but found they had no specific help to offer with my problem. So I broadened my query by asking colleagues from various departments across campus how they deal with this issue.

Many identified with my problem. Some had little tricks they used to try to cope. The most useful of these to me was to take water with me into every class and to take a drink periodically to lubricate the throat. Most wanted me to let them know what I figured out.

It was time to get some expert help. I met with a theatre professor and explained my problem to her. She agreed to work with me to develop more dynamic, expressive patterns of speaking. I also learned ways to strengthen my voice so that I would not get hoarse as easily.

One of the tools I used was a tape recorder. I recorded myself speaking and then analyzed things like my pitch, pattern, and rhythm. With her help, I was able to improve those aspects of my teaching.

The solution

The ultimate solution for me was based on a fundamental idea: practice. That is, I could research and read about this, I

could talk to people about it, but the most important thing is practice. Regular, daily practice of things like rhythm and melody, pitch, and pause has enabled me to develop new habits of speaking. Although I still think about these things when I teach, I now speak without worrying so much about technique.

In terms of practice, “even a few simple vocal exercises every day can soon bring about noticeable improvements.”⁵

One of my favorite ways to practice is to read out loud. I just use a book I am already reading and read out loud for 20 or 30 minutes once or twice a day. I read as if I am reading to interested friends or family members, making a point of being expressive, giving voice to emotions, varying my pitch, tone, and pace depending on the text. This helps strengthen the voice as well as develop good habits of expression.

Just like the athlete who can’t expect to perform at a high level without regular workouts to improve skills and endurance, we shouldn’t expect to teach effectively if we don’t exercise our voices and improve our speaking skills.

Notes

1. See, for example, Scott Walter, “Librarians as Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry into Professional Identity,” *College & Research Libraries* 69, no. 1 (January 2008), 51–71.

2. A few suggested examples are Virgil A. Anderson, *Training the Speaking Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961); Morton Cooper, “Vocal Suicide in Teachers,” *Peabody J Educ* 47, 6, 334–37, May 70; Steven Hastings, “Voice,” *Times Educational Supplement*, no. 4606 (10/22, 2004), 11–14.; Robert T. Tauber and Cathy Sargent Mester, *Acting Lessons for Teachers: Using Performance Skills in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007), 224.

3. Cooper, *Vocal Suicide in Teachers*, 39.

4. Hastings, *Voice*, 11–14.

5. Ibid. 22