

Dialogue, Monologue and Soliloquy in the Large Lecture Class

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Large lecture sections are a necessary and often valuable component of the college or university curriculum; however, many educators are frustrated by the impersonal nature of such classes and the potential ineffectiveness of their lecture presentations. Examining the theatrical concepts of *dialogue*, *monologue* and *soliloquy* provides teachers with a conceptual platform from which to evaluate their own modes of communication while also encouraging a mindset that promotes a more personal and productive environment in their classrooms.

Many college and university teachers who teach large lecture sections express similar frustrations. Comments such as “The students don’t seem interested” or “I feel like I’m boring them!” can often be heard in discussions with colleagues, and for good reason; such difficulties reflect what many researchers believe to be the central theoretical weakness underlying large classes and lecturing in general (e.g., Barber 2007; Cooper & Robinson, 2000; Geske, 1992). At the risk of oversimplifying, many of the standard complaints about the large lecture course can be traced to the impersonal nature of the classroom experience (Stanley & Porter, 2002). “Ineffective,” “cold,” “distant,” and even “boring” – each of these descriptions can be linked in some way to an impersonal communicative environment. Conversely, the strengths of the small seminar over the large lecture – “close, personal faculty-student interactions, the verbal exchange of ideas and opinions, and extensive written work by students with substantial feedback from the faculty instructor” (Hensley & Oakley, 1998, p. 48) – are also grounded on personal contact, or at least on a setting in which the student feels a personal connection with the instructor and the material being presented.

While few educators would argue that large lecture courses are preferable to small classes, there still exist plenty of situations where the large lecture course can be an effective and even necessary part of the curriculum. Traditional lectures, or any of the hybrid forms of lecture-presentation appearing today, can be a useful tool in the educator’s repertoire (Brookfield, 1990). Unfortunately it is difficult to establish a personal link with 500 students in the aloof surroundings large courses often require. Many teachers have proposed creative ways to establish a more intimate atmosphere within their large classes and to lessen the reliance on traditional lecturing. Henley and Oakley (1998) incorporated group debate to provide student-student interaction, while Wahlberg (1997) modified her lectures so that she and the class were cooperating as a study group.

Creative approaches such as these are certainly useful in mending weaknesses of the large lecture situation and encouraging those personal connections that are more desirable to both students and teachers. However, there will still exist situations where lecturing is necessary, due to the nature of the material to be covered or time constraints that appear during the semester. The following discussion is geared towards those situations where the educator chooses to present information in either a traditional lecture section or a creative alternative. In a sense, what is being proposed is a frame of mind or attitude more than any particular technique, though specific mechanical aspects of the lecture can be modified in light of these ideas. Specifically, this mindset directly impacts the mode and tone of verbal communication between the teacher and students. Lecturing is oratory, something we as teachers must always remember, and no matter what philosophies may be generated or adopted to strengthen the educational process within a class, we must first successfully communicate with our students (Dubrow & Wilkinson, 1984).

Most teachers will alter their mindset, whether consciously or not, when moving from a small group presentation to lecturing in front of a large group (Devlin 2006; Cooper & Robinson 2000). While certain modifications will be necessary (remembering to speak loudly and clearly, making gestures larger, looking around a large space, etc.), others may be detrimental to the effectiveness of the lecture. Instead of redirecting one’s conceptual framework, Cleveland recommended that we “adopt a philosophy for teaching a large class that is no different than one for a small class” (Cleveland, 2002, p. 17). This thought could be adjusted slightly to say: do not alter your mindset, and subsequently your mode of communication, when you step in front of a large class. Too often educators adopt an attitude that predisposes them to treat their large classes in an impersonal fashion (Long & Coldren, 2006). Prior to the first lecture the teacher should have constructed a vision of the ideal relationship between themselves and their class, a vision that is realistic,

proactive, and one that will provide definition when addressing the class. In a similar vein Cleveland also noted that teaching is a performing art, and there is much to support her observation (Sarason, 1999; Timpson & Burgoyne, 2002). It should be beneficial then for those who are placed in large lecture sections to prepare themselves mentally – and to evaluate their classroom performance – in light of the performing arts, and in particular the world of theatre.

One set of terms used in discussions of small and large classes (as well as lecturing in general) are *dialogue* and *monologue*. Critics of lecturing note that small group environments enable a dialogue to form between the students and teacher as well as between students themselves (Skidmore, 2006). Lecturing can become a monologue, with the teacher professing his or her knowledge to a passive audience. In this context monologue is seen as something to be avoided whereas dialogue is held up as an ideal form of educational communication (Bannink & van Dam, 2007; Adams, 2006). This taxonomy is restricting, regardless of the obvious benefits of interactive and cooperative learning inherent in a dialogue. Young teachers in particular are pushed into seeing only two options when lecturing: to attempt to establish dialogues with the large section or to resort to the “boring” monologue. Yet when the terminology of theatre is examined, there appears a third option, namely *soliloquy*; and the definitions of each reveal a viable middle ground upon which educators can construct a functional and beneficial philosophy of lecturing.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *dialogue* as “the conversation written for and spoken by actors on a stage” or “a conversation carried on between two or more persons.” It is a verbal exchange of ideas between people, and as such fits the standard vision of how dialogue would function in the classroom. The same dictionary defines *monologue* as “a long speech by one actor in a play” or “a scene in a drama in which only one actor speaks.” It is a generally uninterrupted speech or narrative that tells a complete story or expresses a complete line of thought. More importantly, the monologue is either literally or figuratively delivered to another character or characters, whether these characters are onstage at the time or simply part of the drama as a whole. Though seemingly in accordance with a lecture situation, there are subtle points within this definition with significant implications for the teacher. This becomes apparent when monologue is compared to soliloquy; in fact, it is this third term that is more in line with most teachers’ perspective of how a ‘bad’ lecture is viewed. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *soliloquy* as “an instance of talking to or conversing with oneself, or of uttering one’s thoughts aloud without addressing any person.” A soliloquy is thus a monologue delivered

when no other characters inhabit the stage or dramatic space. The actor is alone with the character’s thoughts and feelings, and presents the illusion of sharing these unspoken internal states.

The distinction between monologue and soliloquy is critical, both to actors and educators, and the application of these concepts to a lecture situation can have immediate and favorable results. Generally speaking, monologues usually have a “discovery,” or some point the character is trying to get across. More importantly, monologues are speaking “to” or “with” someone. In the theatre, this other person is onstage with the actor. For the lecturer, to view their presentation as a monologue means bringing the students onstage with them, emphasizing that what is occurring is an interactive process between co-contributors. In a monologic situation, with the target of the speech being directed to another, the motivation or purpose of the speech is verbalized. In other words, the actor/teacher explains his or her reasoning, an action that Brown and Atkins (1988) saw as necessary for the successful lecture. At the same time, monologues use personal, directed pronouns such as “you,” “I,” and “we” that strengthen the participatory nature of the communication.

The soliloquy is different in many noteworthy ways. To begin with, to whom is the soliloquy directed? The speaker is reflecting upon his or her own thoughts and feelings, not responding to another in a dialogue or dramatic event. A soliloquy is talking to oneself, albeit in a communicative setting. In the theatre, the intended recipient is the audience, who is allowed a glimpse inside the actor’s internal world within the larger context of the surrounding drama. In the classroom, the recipient is the student, no longer an active participant in the communication but a passive witness to a solitary action by the lecturer. In the soliloquy, any motivation or purpose is already assumed by the speaker, so it becomes more a stating of opinion as opposed to the presenting of a reasoned point. Often in these situations personal pronouns are replaced with impersonal or reflective pronouns such as “she,” “he,” “it,” or “one,” reinforcing the distance between the speaker and the hearer.

Monologue is a personal and participatory speech act, even though only one person may be speaking. Soliloquy, however, is impersonal, in that no one other than the actor is intended to hear these words. It is these distinctions that can prove invaluable to the lecturer. These definitions and the concepts surrounding them are a means by which educators can evaluate their classroom performance in terms of the level of personal communication occurring. Far from supplanting other approaches, this mindset reinforces other attempts to make the large lecture section more intimate and successful. Modes of communication

underlie all pedagogical methodologies, and to ignore how one is speaking, or the frame of mind that influences the choice of words or layout of the presentation, might disable any efforts at improvement. When Fisher, Alder, and Avasalu (1998) established criteria for evaluating lectures from both the students' and teachers' perspectives, most of their terminology (e.g., "provide clear explanations," "present material in an interesting way," "stimulate students' interest," "arouse students' curiosity," "use examples relevant to students," "interact with students") centered on the teacher communicating in such a way that each student is impacted upon an individual level. Bartlett (2003, p. 12) described a successful large section lecturer as "casual and conversational, as if he were chatting with a friend," noting that personal elements, even anecdotes, are critical to success. In discussions of collaborative or cooperative learning (be they student/student or student/teacher), a great deal of importance is placed on dialogic encounters (Panitz 1997). While this might seem unlikely in a large lecture section, if the educator is viewing their presentation as a monologue and not a soliloquy, their presentation will reflect the conversational character that is so useful in transmitting and comprehending new thoughts (Bruffee, 1984).

At the most basic level such an approach is keyed into the choice of words teachers use during a lecture and the manner in which he or she speaks. Terminology, tone of voice, and length of phrasing – all are liable to variation depending upon who is seen as the intended audience. Such variations might seem to be a minor part when considered within the context of an hour-long lecture, but it is these subtle inflections that transmit the teacher's state of mind to the students. A few indiscreet words scattered throughout the presentation might be all that it takes to convince students that the teacher is not speaking to them, but merely sharing his or her thoughts to no one in particular. The casual use of advanced terminology with which the students are not familiar, or the appearance of outdated slang in the presentation can indicate that the teacher is no longer concentrating on the audience. On the other hand, too much focus on word choice could of course paralyze the speaker and defeat any attempt to create a personal, communicative forum. Yet if teachers adopt the mindset that they are speaking "with" students, or participating in a monologue and not a soliloquy, then there is less need to focus solely on terminology but instead concentrate on the topic at hand and the individuals with whom they are communicating.

One instance where terminology can reveal a teacher's mindset is found in the use of the first person plural pronouns "we" or "us." Technically these words should join the teacher and students into a unified linguistic entity. Yet if these words are used in an

impersonal context that has alienated the students, then the result can be condescending or patronizing instead of unifying. A statement that begins with "We know that..." or "As we've seen..." becomes authoritative as opposed to inviting, in that students who see themselves as disassociated from the learning environment hear the "we" as representing the teacher's scholarly community, not the community of learners present in the classroom. Likewise any attempt to use a personal or participatory example while speaking in a soliloquy mode will be perceived as artificial. If, when studying a piece of music, the teacher says, "So what do we hear at this point?" many students will not respond. Does the teacher want to know what I am hearing, or what my friend is hearing? Is it assumed that we are hearing the same thing? In fact, the question can imply that there is a single, correct way of hearing the passage that all listeners share. This includes the teacher, of course, so in a sense the students witness the teacher asking the question of themselves, and if the teacher is lecturing on this particular piece of music then the class knows that the teacher is already aware of what he or she is hearing. Eventually many students cannot help but believe that the question was not addressed to them or even meant to be answered.

At a higher stage, the distinctions between monologue and soliloquy can affect the overall structure and organization of the lecture. For instance, Brookfield (1990) gave an example of what he called the "Paced Presentation" in a lecture. In this model he assumed including the students on a personal level in the process, whether it is asking questions of them at strategic points in the presentation or having them write something in response to a topic just discussed. Such an approach helps to create a monologic ambience by shaping not only the length and complexity of the ideas being expressed, but also the length of phrases, the amount of information per sentence, and even the length of each sentence. At each level the pacing or structure resembles that of a conversation and hence brings the students "on stage" with the lecturer. From the student's perspective a more engaging form of speech and a monologic structure to the lecture both allows and encourages students to participate in the lecture – even though they are not speaking – bolstering their attention during the lecture and encouraging immediate contemplation and interpretation of the material (deWinstanley & Bjork, 2002). Frederick (2002) also spoke of incorporating questions within the lecture, or even beginning a class with a question or a challenge to the students to interpret some aspect of the material under study. His examples of possible questions – "What do you see?" "What's going on here?" or "What do you think it means?" – clearly reveal that his choice of terms direct the question to each student as an individual, not to the mass as a single

entity; such questions come across as genuine curiosity or information gathering, not as rhetorical tricks directed towards an ambiguous or fictional collective.

It should be noted that too personal a mode of speaking could eventually work against the lecturer. While the demerits of a dry and pedantic lecture seem self-evident, a presentation that is too relaxed or colloquial can lead to difficulties as well (Levin & Gray, 1983). A “conversational” approach, or achieving the level where one comes across as “chatting” with the class, can actually lead to a loss of focus for a portion of the class. A certain measure of rhetorical discipline is necessary to successfully present the logic and conclusion of a given topic within the time allotted. Extremely relaxed lectures might be “fun” for a while, but most students want more. Likewise, it is also noted that a teacher’s choice of words is but one aspect of their presentation that imparts a personal or impersonal character. Body language, facial expressions, eye contact with students, addressing students by name – all contribute to creating a more personal environment, and all come more naturally when the teacher is viewing their presentation as a discourse or monologue with the students.

Considering the lecture as a mode of theatrical discourse and understanding the distinctions between dialogue, monologue and soliloquy are a useful means for evaluating the mindset a teacher possesses as well as judging the effectiveness of certain oratorical techniques in a large lecture course. The ideas proposed here can be considered a lens through which experienced teachers can re-evaluate their performance in front of large sections, a conceptual tool that can assist in modifying and ideally improving a lecturer’s technique. However, these concepts are particularly pertinent to younger teachers, especially graduate students and newly hired faculty, who are about to, or are in the process of, tackling their first large lecture. The comparison of monologue and soliloquy creates a tangible framework within which practical presentation techniques can be examined and evaluated. If employed early enough this approach can establish patterns of discourse that positively impact upon a long career in teaching and help to maintain a participatory and successful learning environment in any classroom.

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