

Street P (2008) *What a performance! Developing nurse teachers' lecturing persona and identity: a performing arts perspective*. NET International Conference. Churchill College Cambridge, September 2008

Abstract

“I find that good performing artists, not just actors, have an element of danger about them. It is a dangerous business, standing up in front of several hundred of your fellow human beings and saying, I am interesting enough to watch” (Anthony Sher [Actor] 1999:169)

When a lecturer steps into a lecture theatre to teach they take centre stage, adopt a suitable persona and engage in a series of actions that grow out of a specific educational objective (Phillips 1995; Parini 2005). To deliver that objective within a lecture requires a confident persona, a sound knowledge and well developed teaching skills. Delivering a lecture to 250 or more students, however, can provoke high levels of anxiety particularly for those who are new to teaching in a higher education setting (Exley and Dinnick, 2004, Quinn 2000). In the current educational climate of consumerisation, with the increased evaluation of teaching by students, having the ability to deliver high quality, informed, and interesting lectures assumes greater significance for both lecturers and universities (Carr 2007, Higher Education Founding Council 2008, Glass et al 2006). Thus new lecturers often need experience and supervision to develop the tacit knowledge and insight of their own persona and self identity as a lecturer so potentially enhancing their development and performance.

This paper will present the results of a two-phase mixed method study with 81 nurse lecturers and 62 nursing students in one University in the United Kingdom. The study investigated the notion that lecturing has similarities to acting and in doing so has empirically tested the work of Tauber and Mester (1994/2007). Their model proposes that if teachers use the elements of acting, animated voice and body, space, humour, suspense and surprise, props and role play, within a class, they will promote student interest, attention and positive attitudes towards learning. In order for this to occur it must be underpinned by the teacher having a good subject knowledge of the topics they teach. The findings of this study support this tenet, but the findings from phase two propose a series of steps that go beyond that proposed by Tauber and Mester (1994/2007) and propose how lecturers both develop and take on a persona when lecturing, that is often different from that in other parts of their working life.

Results from stage one of the study suggested that students in a lecture could identify if the lecturer was enthusiastic, confident or not confident via the verbal and non-verbal cues he/she presented. It was also clear that lecturers were not seen to be credible unless they were knowledgeable about their subject and had the skills to communicate that knowledge when delivering a lecture. Both lecturers and students showed high levels of agreement with Tauber and Mester's (1994/2007) model suggesting that elements of acting do enhance both the lecturer's ability to deliver a lecture in a confident manner and the effectiveness of the lecturer.

Findings indicated that these lecturers assumed a persona when lecturing, particularly, but not exclusively, when they were nervous. These lecturers went through a process of assuming and maintaining this persona before and during a lecture using the elements of acting proposed by Tauber and Mester (1994/2007). This study offers a development of Tauber and Mester's (1994/2007) work that integrates the models elements of acting into a process of persona adoption. These lecturers went through a process whereby they compare the demands of the lecture with their own knowledge base and skill, this resulted in them undertaking specific preparation in terms of content and delivery style, then they adopted their persona immediately prior to entering the lecture, maintain it throughout the lecture via the use of the elements of acting to achieve an informative interactive lecture. The results of which then feedback into their self concept as a lecturer and may affect the persona they project in future lectures.

This study concluded that lecturing has dramatic, managerial and self-identity performative elements, all of which enhance the lecturer's ability to communicate their subject knowledge in a meaningful way. The social performances that occur during a lecture clearly have dramatic elements and are more like the improvised end of the performing arts rather than the professionally staged, planned and rehearsed performances in the professional theatre. If lecturers, therefore, can take a step back to consider how they deliver lectures and how they can deliberately, yet apparently naturally, use their voices, bodies, space and humour in meaningful ways, to engage their students in lecture, it will not just result in them being perceived as a good lecturer, but also be a genuine act of education.

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