



# Teaching anxiety

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A fear of speaking in public, whether in a lecture or seminar context, is perfectly natural and likely to be shared by most other new teachers or indeed many experienced teachers. Whilst such a fear is understandable, if you allow it to grow into an uncontrolled fear it can become a real problem. If you are prepared to acknowledge fear of lecturing as a totally surmountable challenge, it can be used to work to sharpen your performance as a lecturer.

## Strategies to overcome nerves

- Remember that most students (particularly first years) will be as apprehensive about the first lecture as you are.
- Good preparation is one of the best antidotes to feelings of anxiety - do not leave the lecture preparation until the last minute.
- Physically rehearse your first lecture in the actual venue - check all equipment (microphones, video, overheads) is working, check that overheads can be seen clearly throughout the room, that your lecture notes develop logically and fluently.
- Make yourself a 'lecture toolkit' containing duster or whiteboard cleaner, chalk, whiteboard pens, blank transparencies and OHT pens, pointer for OHTs or maps or visuals, cables for computer connections, microphone, spare batteries for microphone etc. Check these items regularly.
- Teaching is to a large extent a type of performance - if you look confident and in command of the occasion, students will be convinced by your performance and be totally unaware of the fears you actually harbour. Your nonverbal behaviours will be the key to such a performance - so practise looking confident and in control in front of a mirror at home. Smile, stand up straight with shoulders back, make eye contact with students throughout the lecture theatre, use gestures with confidence. If you display enthusiasm and energy in the delivery of your lecture, students will be convinced that this is a lecturer who is in command of not only their subject matter but also their teaching.
- Identify what you are actually fearful of occurring - for example, blanking out, looking stupid? How serious is your fear really? Can it not be controlled?
- List the physical symptoms of your nervousness. Think about ways of averting these symptoms or at least moderating their impact on your performance.
- Give yourself quiet time before the lecture to reflect and relax.

- Develop a number of routine relaxation techniques that can be used before a lecture (e.g. stand up in your office, close your eyes, focus on your toes and work through your entire body, slowly tensing, releasing and wriggling each part of your body). Once you are feeling relaxed, think positive thoughts about yourself as a lecturer - “I am an effective lecturer”, “I am a confident speaker”, “I have nothing of any real substance to fear about delivering this lecture”.
- Whilst relaxed, mentally rehearse the successful delivery of your first lecture - imagine yourself at the front of your first class, speaking fluently and effectively and answering student questions with confidence. Visualise students in seats who look interested and involved in your lecture. Visualise yourself leaving the lecture theatre at the end of a successful class.
- Don't set yourself impossible goals. Do not try and deliver the perfect lecture or performance. Such an expectation is likely to aggravate any fears you may have. Motley and Molloy (1994) draw a distinction between speakers who are 'performance-oriented' and those who are 'communication oriented' - the latter focus on the message and tolerate minor mistakes in their public speaking, whereas the former focus on the polish of their 'performance' and what they perceive as the high expectations of audience evaluation. In order to reduce anxiety Motley and Molloy recommend a reorientation for speakers with a performance orientation to a communication orientation.
- Think of lecturing as a conversation with one student multiplied by x.
- Arrive at the lecture early and prepare your materials on the desk or podium.
- Do not attempt to speak or lecture for the entire class - the most effective teaching promotes active learning not passive learning. This means that you need to integrate activities into the lecture that engage the students in active learning and offer them opportunities for thinking about the things they are doing and hearing - a for example, short writing exercises, group/pair discussions, self-assessment activities, concept mapping, debates or role plays, formative tests or quizzes. Apart from being more effective teaching practice, this takes some of the pressure off you to be performing for the entire class.
- Don't be frightened to pause throughout your lecture, to give yourself time to think about the next point.
- Don't attempt to know it all. Acknowledge to students when you don't know something and return to the next lecture having researched the answers to student questions. Attempt to anticipate student questions to some extent before the lecture.
- Avoid compensating for your own uncontrolled fears of lecturing by overwhelming students with too much content or by being apologetic, defensive, arrogant or superior.

## Other sources of assistance

- TEDI runs workshops on presentation skills for teachers that include a section on dealing with anxiety in teaching.
- Rostrum, TAFE and some courses in The University of Queensland's continuing education program offer opportunities for personal development as a public speaker.
- Invite a colleague to attend one of your lectures to give you feedback about what you are doing well so as to build your confidence as a speaker. After they have focused on your strengths, you may feel ready to accept some criticisms as well.
- There are a number of packages and books available in the library that offer self-development approaches to dealing with stress control generally and the stresses of public speaking more specifically.
- Have one of your lectures videoed and spend some time reviewing your performance in terms of the way you begin the lecture, nonverbal communication, presentation skills, the way you deal with student questions etc.
- Ask around in your faculty or School to find out who are considered by students and staff to be outstanding lecturers. Ask such colleagues if you can sit in on some of their lectures to see how they approach their teaching. Talk to them about how they deal with nervousness.

## Further reading material

Eison, J. (1990). Confidence in the classroom: Ten maxims for new teachers. *College Teaching*, 38(1), 21-25.

McCarthy, P. & Hatcher, C. (1996). *Speaking persuasively: Making the most of your presentations*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Motley, M. & Molloy, J. (1994). An efficacy test of a new therapy ('communication-orientation motivation') for public speaking anxiety. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 22, 48-58.

Stuart, C. (1988). *Effective speaking*. Aldershot, UK: Gower.

## Useful links

<http://www.acs.uwa.edu.au/csd//altmodes/>

Alternative modes of teaching and learning - an integrated Web-based resource from the University of Western Australia, which offers descriptions of a range of alternative modes of teaching and learning.

## Further references on teaching and learning strategies

Chalmers, D. & Fuller, R. (1997). *Teaching for learning at university*. London: Kogan Page.

Galbraith, M.W. (Ed.) (1990). *Adult learning methods*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.

Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. New York: Cambridge.

Knox, A.B. (1987). *Helping adults learn*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Seaman, D.F. & Fellenz, R.A. (1989). *Effective strategies for teaching adults*. Ohio: Merrill Publishing Company.