

“THE TEACHING VOICE: EXERCISES AND TIPS FOR USING AND PROTECTING YOUR MOST VALUABLE INSTRUCTIONAL ASSET”

Transcript of a presentation by Pamela Haig-Bartley

OPENING REMARKS:

- reflecting on the title of this session, it occurred to me that I should clarify that I actually feel that your BRAIN is your MOST valuable instructional asset -- but ideally your voice is engaged with your brain!
- unfortunately, this is not always the case.
- the ancient yogis believed that the past was symbolized by the body, the future was symbolized by the mind, and the breath -- you, in the here and now/the present -- was what links the two.
- your voice is an intimate part of you: air travels through your body, taking on the nuances of your ideas and your emotions, and when it re-emerges it's filled with your essence. IDEALLY.
- in fact, when you ask people to describe their own voice, they can be brutal. Can you provide me with some terms used to describe voices? It's thin, harsh, gravelly, hoarse, weak, nasal, tinny. Some of these words may have been used to describe your own voice. Many of us are using voices that don't begin to convey who we really are.
- this is a problem for teachers, of course, because we need to be able to convey the ideas we are passionate about in a way that will engage our students, fire them up so that they will be intrigued and passionate about these ideas, too. If you sound bored or uninterested in what you're teaching, how can you expect your students to be enthused? If I say to you: (dead monotone) "This proposal will revolutionize the way the world's populace think and behave in the new millennium." -- are you excited? Do you think that I am?

Introductory exercise:

- (1) turn to the person beside you, look into their eyes and say "Hello. It's great to meet you." in a dead monotone. Let them say this back to you. What impression do you "get"?
- (2) same thing, but convey to them with your: "Hello. It's great to meet you" that you think they are unbelievably witty/attractive/charming or whatever. You can say this to me if you're shy!

There should be a difference in the delivery of those two greetings. If there isn't — or if there isn't much difference -- then you need to work a little more on your "psychophysical connection": connecting the mind and body with your breath (and by "breath" here, I mean your voice) in such a way that they are integrated as expressive instruments.

- think about it: the sounds coming out of your mouth set up a whole range of expectations about how you'll behave, how accessible you are, what your sense of humour is like, how high your

energy level and, indeed, intelligence level are, and —— crucially for a teacher —— how interested you are and how confident about the material you are teaching.

- the good news is that everyone has the potential to have a strong, expressive voice -- it's only bad habits which inhibit your sound.

First, to start, some thoughts about the voice:

- 1) as I've mentioned, the voice is a transparency to one's ideas, thoughts and feelings.
- 2) the voice is rooted in (housed in) the body.
- 3) the voice emanates from your centre -- not your throat.
- 4) any tension in the spine or adjacent joints will block or inhibit the voice.

Two ideas to be mindful of:

- 1) making sound should be/can be a pleasurable and joyful experience.
- 2) sound loves to live where there is no tension -- tension kills vibrations e.g. kettle drum with hand placed upon it.

The three key components of good voice work are:

- 1) body: speaking is a physical activity. The body should be physically released and aligned; in a state of relaxed readiness.
- 2) breath: free-flowing and supported at all times.
- 3) voice: free, neither held in the throat nor locked behind the jaw or in the tongue. Your speech should connect that free, warmed, placed voice to text/ideas.

We will try, in the brief time we have here, to address these components.

I: BODY WORK: PHYSICAL RELEASE: (seated in chair)

- we'll do a progressive relaxation exercise as to help you become more aware of your bodies and the tension you habitually hold. (Remember that self-consciousness can be self-defeating: so try not to pay attention to those around you in the classroom,) Close your eyes. Now, progressively tighten most of the muscles in your body. Begin by tightening your toes, then feet, calves, thighs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, back, shoulders, upper-arms, forearms, hands, fingers, neck, scalp, face. When all the muscles are tensed, hold until I say to release or a count of 3. Now, feed in a big sigh. Focus on the sensation in the relaxed muscles.

- lift up shoulders; tuck chin: say your name and address.
- sound is constricted.
- lift shoulders again; hold; relax and drop. Feel the difference.
- do a couple of shoulder rolls forward and back.
- now, do shoulder rolls: hold shoulders back and say name and address.

- sound again is constricted (“The Bluff” position).
- shoulder rolls again, but let them drop neutrally in centre.

- shoulder rolls: hold shoulders curved forward and say name and address.
- sound again is constricted.
- shoulder rolls again, but let them drop neutrally in centre.

- turn head gently to R and L; roll head in circles; come centre. Feed in impulse for a couple of nice big sighs on sound.

- stand up. Have a great big stretch and yawn -- but don’t hit the people beside you! Now, let head and torso drop forward, then roll up like a little rag doll from the base of the spine, head is last thing to come into place; sigh out on sound.

- still standing, think of lengthening your spine, feet flat on the floor and relaxed, hands resting beside your legs, not looking either down on or up at the world; be level. Get aligned. Imagine that someone is painlessly pulling you by the hair on the top of your head, to make you an inch taller, and you are “hanging” by your hair, dangling down easily.

- close eyes and relax jaw: lips slightly open. With your mind’s eye, follow your breath. Where does it go? Feel it drop in cool, turn warm inside, and release up warm. Put hand on belly, shake up your breakfast. Direct breath down below your hands.

- open your eyes. Easily, do TOS: huh, huh-huh.

- now, lean over, give yourself a hug on your lower ribs. Try to direct your breath down below your hands. Feel the breath drop far down into your body, and keep your shoulders and your bottom uninvolved. See if the breath will make your fingers move. Try TOS: huh, huh-huh.

- come up to aligned standing again.

- open your eyes widely and hold for a count of four, release. Close your eyes tightly, hold for four, release.

- open your mouth as widely as possible. Hold for four counts, release. Purse your lips tightly, hold, release.

- puff out your cheeks by blowing air into them, keeping your lips compressed, hold. Release the air and suck in your cheeks. Repeat.

- lick lips; do horse blows.

- turn it into brnnmm-mmmm. Drive tricycle.

- do easy humming: put your hands on your face, on your sternum, on your belly on your lower back, etc. to test for vibrations.

- check to see that your belly and throat are relaxed. sitting, bounce the sound out, relax jaw on “ahhhh”.

- so, we’re going to move on to the next phase of working on your voice. We now, presumably, have a somewhat more relaxed body, which in turn allows the breath to drop in properly. The next crucial element of good vocal production is support. A huge percentage of vocal injury is caused by lack of support, so if you suffer from frequent hoarseness or laryngitis, be aware that you can help yourself by developing good abdominal support.

- to test what I mean by “support,” say “Huh Huh!” as in a masked avenger of some sort, come to save the day. If your abdomen contracted as you said that, then these sounds were being actively supported: by muscular activity in your lower abdominals.

- now, consciously add support to your deep breath: do rff”, “fff-fff”, “fff-fff-fff”. Place a hand on your breastbone to check to see that your upper chest isn’t heaving.

- do the same thing, voiced, with “huh”, breathe, then huh—huh, then 3, 4, 5, 6, ——> 10 huhs; let the belly hang/relax between each breath.

- feel the support working on the huh.

- now, try supporting the breath on different sounds: ssssss; shhhhhh; vvvvvv; jjjjjjj [dj]; zzzzzz. Be conscious of tension creeping into the throat. Let the abdominal muscles do the work.

- so now we’ve worked on: (1) letting the breath drop in, and then (2) getting that deep breath supported. Now we need to work on placing and shaping that voice.

- massage jaw muscles. As experiment, clench teeth and say your name and address. Smooth jaw down. Try saying name again, but open mouth wider than normal (put in two fingers). You can have all the support in the world but if you don’t open your mouth, the sound can’t possibly get out.

- with that in mind, let’s get you to play with some of these muscles that tend to tighten:

- facial exercises first: lion/prune, mosquitoes, tongue, blow kisses.

- tip head forward, shake out face; shake out tongue.

- relax tongue in bottom of mouth; do a big yawn (exercises the soft palate).

Some common voice quality problems:

- nasal: (demonstrate) Usually caused by tight tongue root; too much air being forced out nose. Three nasal sounds are mm, nn, and ng. Test yourself: count slowly from one to ten. When you reach the number five, gently pinch your nostrils shut and keep counting. There should be no severe change after you pinch your nose. (demonstrate) Now, say “ng” (breathe); say “hah”. Alternate back and forth. Feel the change of direction of the sound: from out the nose to out the mouth. To alleviate nasality, do tongue circles (as above) and yawn and sigh out.
- other nasal voice: (demonstrate) This makes you sound like Sylvester Stallone’s character, Rocky. Too little air is in the nose. There is a lack of nasal resonance because the nose is so stuffed up that the airstream can hardly get into the nasal cavity to resonate or, if it can get in at the back, it can’t come out again at the front through the nostrils. This voice is low, often monotonous, and sounds like you have a cold -- and people often make erroneous judgments about your intellect.
- gravelly voice: (demonstrate -- tough guy voice; also known as “vocal fry”.) This is due to lack of support: you often start out well, but then the air peters out. Sounds painful and is hard on the vocal chords.
- breathy voice: (demonstrate -- Marilyn Monroe) This vulnerable sound may be appealing to some, but it doesn’t carry (unless you have a microphone). This is hard on your vocal chords, too, because they get windburn: too much air is being forced through them, and only a small portion of the chords themselves are vibrating at all. Everyone try this.

II: STANDING: ALIGNMENT:

- try the tension exercise standing but this time, not progressively: All at once, tighten everything up (bottom, knees, shoulders, jaw, neck, hands) and say name and address.
- now, relax, stretch and yawn in a luxurious fashion.
- now, we’ll try to get aligned: get feet parallel, wiggle knees, hips, shoulders, gently roll head on shoulders, then imagine that you are a marionette and a puppeteer is pulling your strings so that you can stand effortlessly --only the tension necessary to stay in a state of relaxed readiness. Ask yourself if this seems foreign to you. Do you lift your shoulders, lock your knees, squeeze your tush when you speak?
- now we’ll play with resonators and pitch. Stay aligned but tip head back, do a Tarzan kind of pounding on chest: chest resonators: “Haahhhh”.
- head in centre: middle-range: “Huh”.
- head forward: upper (head) range: “Hee”.
- try your name in these three positions. What seems most normal to you?
- do a yawn sliding down and up the scale on “ahh”.

- try going up the scale with bubbles of sound. Try going down. Now go all way up and down on one breath.

III: SITTING AGAIN: EXPRESSIVE VOICE AND SPEECH:

- just for fun, a few tongue—twisters: (try one, then three, then a steady stream of these) ...

- kinky cookie
- giggle gaggle
- eleven benevolent elephants
- red leather yellow leather
- sushi chef
- rubber baby buggy bumpers
- abominable abdominals
- can't you won't you don't you (not "CHEW")
- did you would you could you (not "JEW")

- let's play with the psychophysical connection now:

first, just sigh for no reason, other than I've asked you to. Now, try a sigh again (or any kind of nonverbal sound that seems appropriate — such as "Ahh!", "Oh!", "Hmmm", "MMM!" etc.), but connect it with these thoughts...

Imagine that the University, in an unprecedented move, has decided to beef up your contract with a number of perks. You discover to your delight that:

- your salary has been tripled (reaction?)
- any and all research grants you applied for -- and even some that you didn't -- have come through, so your research work will be abundantly funded in perpetuity (reaction?)
- a limousine service has been arranged to pick you up at home at your convenience and deliver you back there each day after work (reaction?). Ditto for any and all appointments for your partner and/or children. (reaction?)
- a full—time housecleaning staff have been hired for you (reaction?)
- a laundry service has been provided for you (and your partner/family) so you need never bother yourself about washing, drying, ironing or dry-cleaning ever again. (Reaction?)
- a five-star chef will have delicious, hot meals waiting for you and your family whenever you arrive home (reaction?)
- (uh-oh) Bad news: now, in this era of fiscal restraint, you discover that all of those perks have been removed (reaction?)

You see, you have very expressive voices!

- now, let's apply this to something quite specific. I would like you all to think about one food or beverage that you REALLY enjoy. Since this is before lunch, perhaps this is cruel, but I want you to close your eyes and think about the way that food/beverage: looks, sounds, feels, tastes,

and smells. Everybody got something? (Are you salivating?) Now, on a count of three, I'd like you --all together -- to state the name of that food/beverage firmly, with commitment, to let me know how you feel about it. Let your voices be expressive.

- now, to get you to stop salivating, try this: Think of a food or drink you absolutely loathed when you were a kid. Use sense memory to think about how it looked, sounded/texture, felt, tasted, and smelled. Again, on a count of three, say the name of that food/beverage out loud, expressing how you felt as a child when confronted with this particular dish.

- let's bring this up to the present: something more useful. I'd like you to focus now on an area of research that you most enjoy. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself engaged in that research/work. Now, turn to the person who was so charming or handsome or attractive or witty at the beginning of this session, and say to them: "Hello, my name is [blank], and I'm very interested in the study of [blank] OR I really like [blank] ." The first time, I'd like you both to say it to each other at the same time (simply for practice), then I'd like you to take turns. (Do this.) Did you believe the other person? If not, why not?

- mood or attitude is primarily conveyed by your vocal tone or quality. Try saying the following sentence different in a variety of situations which I'll provide:
Say "Please don't do that again!" as if you are:

- a parent speaking to a three-year—old child.
- a lawyer speaking to a client.
- an irate boss speaking to an employee.

- note that the tone or timbre of your voice probably changed as you assumed different roles. Ask yourself whether the tone you habitually employ is actually conveying what you intend it to convey!

IV:PRACTICAL CONCERNS:

Caring for your voice:

1. Drink water -- lots of water to hydrate/lubricate your vocal chords/folds. Bring a bottle of water with you when you teach.
2. Be careful of tea, coffee, soda pop with caffeine: these are all diuretics and flush water from your system. Loss of moisture makes the mucous in your throat more concentrated - thus more throat clearing is necessary. (As an aside: Alcohol also dehydrates the body but its consumption before teaching should be vigorously discouraged for reasons other than merely its dehydrating properties!!)
3. Dairy products and sugar. There are various theories about this. Test for yourself — in some individuals, these seem to cause production of more phlegm; with the result that you have to clear your throat a lot.
4. Humidifiers are good; smoking is bad.

5. Another tip: Pineapple juice, as opposed to lemon or grapefruit juice, is supposed to be very good for your voice -- so give it a try.

V:FINAL EXERCISE:

- think of something or someone you really love (a food, a drink, a person, a vacation destination), get a clear image of it/them in your mind, then, on the count of three, say it out clearly and in a supported fashion, allowing how you feel about this particular substance, person or place to be conveyed by your expressive voice.

Well done!

I have handouts here which have many of the exercises we went through today. Those people who wish to leave now may help themselves to a handout on their way out, and, once they've cleared out, I will be happy to stay to entertain questions.

To one and all, have a great teaching year -- and remember, when all else fails, breathe! Thank you!