

Teaching As Performance

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Judging from the enthusiastic responses from over 350 people attending the LIRT Conference Program 2000, "Teaching as Performance", instruction librarians are greatly interested in honing their skills as effective, confident speakers and presenters of information.

Monika Antonelli, a Reference Librarian at the University of North Texas, and Joe Dempsey, a Chicago actor who is also an American Theatre Company member and a former Second City National Touring Company member, shared their experiences in performing to a variety of audiences from university students to other less-than-enthusiastic groups.

Antonelli, who also holds a master's degree in theatre, began her talk with a sample voice to display her other career in voicing for television cartoons. The sound illustrated how audiences can be swayed by tight, high, nervous voices as opposed to resonant, low tones. This point was reinforced by an audience exercise in "King Kong, Ping Pong, Bing Bong" sung in progressively lower ranges to loosen the voice.

In her PowerPoint presentation, Antonelli highlighted the necessity to warm up physically for teaching as, indeed, a performance. Neck and shoulder rolls, voice exercises and variety, and the "power of silence" to make a point to students all help to set the stage for instruction. And, as Antonelli demonstrated, even a prop such as a rubber chicken can not only break the ice, but it can also serve as a lesson in keyword searching in several Internet search engines to highlight variances in retrieval.

Dempsey acknowledged at the beginning of his talk that nervousness is a natural part of teaching as performance. The best way to deal with it is to be honest about what you are feeling at the moment, but at the same time be prepared with your material.

As Dempsey observed, "You are there to teach, but they [students] are there to teach you also." This statement, he noted, is important to remember because not every technique will work with every audience. And, in the case of a bad performance or a seemingly ineffective instruction session, it is necessary to "shake it off . . . forgive yourself."

An interactive question-and-answer period with the speakers and audience generated some additional valuable tips for dealing with unenthusiastic students. If they do not want to be in a session, acknowledge their resistance and accomplish what is possible. Antonelli added that, if a student gives a wrong answer to a question, "Always say yes to the class" while following up with the correct answer in a dialogue with the class.

In the case of inheriting a bad classroom dynamic or other difficult classes, both speakers noted that a problem should not be denied. Instead, attempt to address the problem upfront and use humor, but carefully, depending upon the situation.

Antonelli and Dempsey were both excellent examples of the quote ending Antonelli's presentation: "Don't be afraid to go on a limb, for that is where the fruit is."