# Faculty Forum

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## On Speaking and Silence

I confess that my abiding sin as a teacher is that I talk too much. Those who know me will not be surprised. I have struggled with this problem since my earliest days as a teacher. This summer I taught a wonderful class called "War and Memory." My students and I had a great time, and because we had such a great time I felt justified in dominating every discussion. I responded to almost every student comment and elaborated on most of their points. Mea culpa, mea culpa.

Just before fall classes began, I attended a workshop on teaching our new freshman seminar courses and had my self-assurance rudely punctured. A seminar, one of the workshop handouts told me, should be characterized by students doing 97% of the talking. 97%! That's too lofty a goal for a hardened reprobate like me, but, shaken back to the roots of my own pedagogical beliefs, I have pledged to achieve 51% this semester. I will let the students talk just a little more than half the time and then build from there.

At the first general faculty meeting this year, I made some impromptu comments about low faculty morale and the lack of effective communication between faculty and administration. My purpose in speaking at the meeting was to call attention to what I perceive as one serious problem (among several) at the university level at WCU. It is the same problem that has cropped up in my own classroom: bad pedagogy. Too much talking from the front of the room and not enough interaction between speaker and listener. We faculty have responded just as my students often do: we have lost heart; we have become sullen and disgruntled; worst of all, we have become passive.

In his response to my comments, the Chancellor said that a massive gathering like the general faculty meeting is no place for dialogue. If he is worried that the meeting could turn into a chaotic free for all with no constructive results, I share his concern. However, by applying principles of good pedagogy, I think an orderly, invigorating discussion can be conducted with a group of most any size. I will suggest two alternate ways to run this meeting and one device for generating on-going faculty discussion of university issues. These techniques, in the classroom or in general faculty meetings, can turn passive listeners into active participants.

The first technique, called the "feedback lecture," is designed to minimize the loss of attention that afflicts any audience, regardless of maturity or commitment to the subject, after approximately 25 minutes of lecture. In a "feedback lecture," the speaker stops maybe halfway through the lecture, asks the listeners to gather in groups of three or four (people can simply turn in their seats), and then poses a question. The question should be open-ended, with no "correct" answer. The groups "buzz" for about ten minutes. The lecturer then calls them back together and solicits responses from the group. With a newly invigorated and interested audience, the lecturer may then resume, stopping again as necessary. At the end of a feedback lecture, it's helpful to pass out 3x5 cards and ask all listeners to write down what they thought was the most important thing they heard during the lecture. This provides the lecturer with immediate feedback, which can often be surprising.

An alternative to the feedback lecture is not to lecture at all but to expect the audience to assemble having already read the material to be covered. In the case of the general faculty meeting, the Chancellor could disseminate copies of his speech in advance. Let the faculty read this address, mark it up, highlight it, and bring it to the meeting. After brief introductory remarks, break into small groups (as above) and assign a specific task. The simplest option might be for the Chancellor to ask the groups to comment on his address, but this approach may be a bit too unfocused. To organize the groups a bit more tightly, the Chancellor could ask each group to come up with one question, based on his address. This would take 7-10 minutes, leaving plenty of time for the Chancellor to hear and respond to a number of these questions. A still more focused approach would be for the Chancellor to identify four or five key themes and assign the small groups at random (number them off) to examine a single theme, coming up with their own response or further questions. This might require closer to twenty minutes but would still leave ample time to share the small group responses and hear the Chancellor react to them.

These practices would involve the faculty in the conversation about the difficulties the university faces and the direction the university should go. Most issues are clearly not solely the domain of the administration or the faculty but the joint concern of both. By including faculty in these discussions in a meaningful way, administrators might convince more people that faculty voices and opinions are valued and respected.

Some administrators might respond that the faculty may always email their responses to the appropriate agency directly. This is true, and the Chancellor is generally good about answering his email. The problem here is two-fold: first, I suspect that many faculty feel too disempowered to avail themselves of this avenue; and second, individual communication does not allow the administration or the writer to know how many other faculty members share their concern. The problem with individual emails also is part of a very basic truth about power. Where a preponderance of power is concentrated in a few hands, only a collective voice will garner much attention, much less action.

Finally, to maintain an on-going conversation about this university, let's set up an electronic chatroom. Contributors could open a discussion of any relevant issue rather than always depending on the administration to set the agenda. A moderator would prevent the discussion "threads" from degenerating into endless wheel-spinning or personal attacks. Faculty could briefly scan the submissions at their leisure, deleting without reading whatever did not look interesting. The truly disengaged could "unsubscribe" altogether and not receive these emails. My hope is that if we implemented such a discussion group, the Chancellor and other administrators would keep abreast of faculty thinking and contribute themselves when moved to do so.

I feel so strongly about the need to crack the "culture of silence" that I am willing to serve as the first moderator of a university-wide chat-group. I am not so naïve as to imagine that merely opening communication will solve all of our problems, nor do I believe that lack of communication is our only or most serious difficulty. But if faculty can break free of the paralyzing affects of fear and apathy and break into the conversation that administration has been having without us, then we can get some of the other issues out into the light.

The techniques I suggest may not do much to alter the balance of power. The administration will still administer, even as I still maintain authority when I use these practices in my classroom. Nevertheless, allowing other voices to speak provides an infusion of democracy. The results can be dramatic. The passive become active, the disengaged become passionate, and what was once a tedious responsibility becomes an encounter eagerly sought. As flawed as my own classroom is, I have used these practices just enough to glimpse the possibilities. Come on, people, join me in my pledge: 51% or bust!

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