

Free voice
care advice
for teachers

It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it.....

... and that's what gets results

*Good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths theatre.
(Gail Godwin)*

.... but an actor gets years of training to use their voice. You just get a couple of quick tips – if you're lucky – like “Try not to breathe in the chalk dust or marker-pen fumes”. With an increasing number of teachers having problems with their voice and even the government starting to realise there's an issue, some PGCE courses etc do include some training. The one at my local university is typical, though, in that it's remedial and only available for people who've had problems on their first (diagnostic?) teaching practice.

In fact, only this week, **Philip Parkin** told the **PAT** annual conference (August, 2006) that “*care and the use of the voice should be an essential and mandatory component of all initial teacher training - and increasingly a component of the training of teaching assistants*”!

Once you reach NQT status it's for real though. When your voice goes, you're in trouble. You can't teach. Full stop. In fact it's more important than that, because as you'll know, teachers don't just use your voice for actually teaching: the odds are that you use

it as your main method of Classroom Management as well. What's more recent research suggests that about 1 in 10 long serving teachers are likely to damage their voices at work, sometimes resulting in early retirement. Others have an ongoing struggle with voice problems.

So it's not just NQTs who need to keep their voices lively and young. If you've been doing it for years there's still the probability that you could improve and that you might even need to think about any long term damage you've been doing to yourself. Teaching techniques have changed over the years, as has the equipment and environment you work in, and the way you use your voice should to.

Personally, I'd argue that anyone and everyone should get some decent CPD in using their voice as a teacher, but in the real world there are some simple questions you can ask yourself to see if you need to change your self-image from the range of "*should get around to it sometime to avoid problems and to get the best out of my students*" to the "*need to get it sorted out now to help with my current problems*". For a start, check yourself off against the following list. The more ticks you get, the more you might want to think about getting some help.

1. You're exhausted at the end of the day/week
2. You have time off work with colds/sore throats
3. Cutting through classroom chatter is a problem
4. Students take less notice of you than others who "just have it"
5. Even *you* find your lessons are boring sometimes
6. You have to repeat yourself for clarity
7. You use a didactic teaching style, even occasionally
8. Frustration creeps in: you don't excite your classes about your subject
9. You resort to just shouting...*ever!*

Some recent research reported by the BBC goes so far as to suggest that pretty well any poor speaking quality can affect pupils ability to retain what you tell them!

I said just now that pretty much everyone could do with some (ongoing) training and giving you a list of problems might give the wrong impression: it's not all about "avoiding the bad": far from it. Getting your voice to be as good as it can be has plenty of positive aspects to it too. For example, at the risk of sounding like the proverbial second hand car salesman, you'll

1. Enthuse – more range and more flexibility mean more fun in your voice
2. Control – authority often comes from a tone of voice
3. Survive – less work talking leaves more energy for the rest of what you do

I've seen (and been taught by!) teachers who were marvellous. People who inspired me and made me want to, well..... do what *they* did. To a man (and woman) they all had passionate, comfortable voices. (If you're still out there Mr Tierney and Mr Worrall, I ended up with a PhD in geography!) They also had almost no trouble in their classes – and I'm convinced that was because, in part, their tone of voice brooked no nonsense.

I've also seen, and been taught by, lovely people who weren't teachers - that is, they were in the classroom in that role but just weren't teaching me anything. Why not? Because they were either boring, ineffective or both. And so were their voices.

So what made the former so special and the latter so lack-lustre? There was never a dull moment in my classes with the former;

even taking the register had fascination because of the richness and timbre of the voice: think - would Martin Luther King be so famous if he sounded like a half-baked shrimp when he made his famous speech? I think not.

It's time to move on to some practical advice. I've put some specific tips at the end of this article for the impetuous but a little help in working on your voice at a general level is always a good starting point. For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to break your voice down into a three-part model: remember that in 'real life' it's not like that, but instead is a beautifully integrated system. For convenience only then, the three parts are

- **Power**
- **Generation**
- **Control**

Roughly speaking they equate to the work done in and by your lungs, your throat and your mouth.

Let's start with **Power**.

The power for your voice comes from the air you exhale. The more air you let out of your lungs over a period of time, the louder your voice will come out (for you, that is, don't compare yourself to other people). There are physical-capacity limits to this, too, but you get the idea. There are two ways of getting air into and out of your lungs and both work on the same principle. If you increase the volume of your lungs you'll lower the air-pressure and so 'suck' air into them; when you decrease the volume you'll obviously increase the air pressure so 'blow' air out of your lungs and up your throat, between your vocal folds. The two different ways of

getting the air into your lungs are related to how you make this expansion and contraction of your lungs' capacity.

The singers amongst you will know immediately that I'm going to refer to using your inter-costal muscles and your diaphragm muscles. The latter is the large sheath of muscle that sits, crudely speaking, between your lungs and your digestive system. When you pull it down and out you increase your lung capacity, breathing in. Your inter-costal muscles (ICM) work by pulling your rib cage up and out to do the same thing. Unfortunately the amount of air you can move by doing things this latter way is pretty restricted and, what's more, there is only a limited amount of control you can use over how the air flows. To make matters worse, using your inter-costal muscles to breathe is associated with the fight-or-flight syndrome, whereby your body puts itself onto a high alert physically, to help you respond to an immediate danger.

A key feature here is that you breathe out using the same technique as you use to breathe in and so you'll also limit the length of your sentences; that in turn gives you less flexibility to how you speak and – inevitably – makes you less interesting to listen to.

Because of the limitations of your ICM, the knack is to use your diaphragm as well: it gives your voice more resonance, more power, control, flexibility, warmth, projection and – importantly – it's less hard work. The other major advantage of using your diaphragm muscles to breathe is that they're not associated with your fight-or-flight syndrome. If you ever finish your day wondering why you feel like you've been in a war zone, it's probably because you're using your ICM to breathe and so your body's been tensed up to fight or run away all day.

Of course, teaching 9H for History last thing on a Friday afternoon might make anyone feel like that, but.....

Using your diaphragm, of course, easier said than done, so here's a very simple exercise to draw your attention to what 'should' be happening.

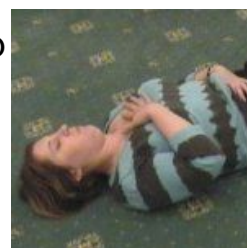
- Lie down, flat on your back. Make sure you're warm and comfortable and won't be distracted or interrupted. Using your left hand, slide your fingers under the small of your back: if you can't fit them in, great. If there's space for your hand to slide between you and the floor take your hand out and do the rest of this exercise with your knees bent up and your feet flat on the floor so that more of your back is in contact with the floor.
- Close your eyes – it helps you to concentrate and makes you less likely to be self-conscious.
- Put your left hand on your stomach, palm flat, making sure that there's no big belt buckle or similar thing in the way. Generally speaking a good place to start is with the knuckle of your index finger over your navel, but everyone's different and you'll need to experiment.
- Put your right hand flat on your chest, relatively high up, over your sternum (the bone connecting your ribs at the front).
- Breathe slowly, comfortably and naturally until you relax.

- Now concentrate on your hands. Once you've relaxed, you'll probably find that your left hand is being moved up and down as you breathe in and out: your right hand less so. This is what you're aiming for when you breathe standing up.
- Make a conscious effort to remember exactly how it feels and see if you can re-create the sensation when you're standing. Experiment with standing against a wall and so on if it helps. Try to "feel" the contact between your back and the floor, even when you're standing up. The best way of doing this is to go through each part of your body individually while you're lying down and see how much of your weight it's taking - and then use the memory of that once you've stood up.

I find that many people have trouble with that last instruction: the best way to do it is probably to start at the top of your head and then scan down your body, slowly, feeling which bits of it are taking what pressure against the floor. For example, no one's shoulders have a uniform distribution of their weight but instead have areas or points of much higher pressure.

(If you find that, despite your best efforts, your right hand is the one being moved you might benefit from looking at the amount of stress and/or tension you're carrying around with you on a day-to-day basis.)

The picture shows you this exercise that might help understand my instructions, but I should give you a word of caution before you rush off and have a go. Firstly, because you're changing the way you breathe you'll be changing the amount of oxygen in your blood and so on. You might feel light-headed or feel a few



moments of low blood pressure as you stand up (technically: postural hypo-tension). Just wait it out – but use your common sense if you've got a medical condition, obviously. Secondly, this exercise can take a few goes to get right; don't panic if it doesn't work perfectly first time.

Moving up to the **Generation** of the sound, which happens in your throat, the situation is much easier in many ways. In fact it's vastly *more* complex but, largely because of this, it isn't something that you can consciously control. Your vocal folds (what people think of as the 'voice box' sometimes) work incredibly hard to generate a sound, which is, in essence, your voice.

They do this by setting up pulses or vibrations in the air-flow provided by your lungs, as in the section above. Treat them with respect and give them the room they need to work in; in other words, make sure that as you do your thing in the classroom (or meetings, or parent-sessions, or) you take a moment to make sure your head and neck are in the right position relative to your shoulders (which should be nice and relaxed, too). A few pointers would be to:

- Make sure your head isn't turned or twisted habitually – check very carefully in a mirror; you'd be surprised at the number of people I work with who tend to hold their head at an angle or on a twist without knowing it.
- Make sure your head isn't too raised (or too lowered). We're visually-orientated animals, so there's a bit of a tendency to tip our heads backwards, raising our eyes to see the threat coming – particularly when we're nervous or stressed – so that our eyes are raised. Unfortunately, this pulls at your

throat a bit, putting strain on your vocal folds and limiting their flexibility. The result is that your voice ‘thins out’.

- Drop your shoulders.... now drop them again – most people can’t let go of all their tension in one go.
- Monitor how often your throat is sore. Chances are that if it happens frequently or regularly it’s caused by too much ‘tightness’ in your throat. Pay particular attention to any patterns (you might want to jot things down) as they’re a clue to what it is that’s stressing you up and thereby causing the voice problem – a few symbols on a paper copy of your timetable or in your diary is all it needs to keep a record of this that you can examine at your leisure.

The last part of the threesome I’ve outlined is **Control**; this is my shorthand for what happens in your mouth, where the raw sounds generated in your throat are converted into specific words. The key thing you can do to improve your voice at this point is to work on your clarity and diction – and the key improvement most people can make is simply to warm up their mouths before they start to use it. As a culture I find that we’re less expressive, facially, than many other cultures and this has consequences for the muscles around our mouth; we aren’t used to using them.

Fortunately, I’m not suggesting that you spend ten minutes before each lesson doing exercises, simply that you do one of two things (or both!).

Option one is to yawn. I’m not talking about the nice, polite, behind the hand, stifled, bored-at-a-party type yawn. I’m talking about the kind of thing a waking cat does that makes it look like its

jaw is dislocating! Not only will this stretch out many of your face muscles, it also has the added advantage of getting rid of some of the built-up carbon dioxide and so on in your lungs, making you more awake.

Option two is simply to rub your face. Generally speaking, the area to cover is that area covered by a beard. Pay particular attention to the upper lip, not because it needs extra work, but because it's quite often, and easily, over-looked.

The idea in both cases is to stimulate the muscles and to increase the blood-flow to the area. With any luck, you'll find that your clarity of diction improves considerably, making you easier to hear and to understand.

Remember : I've ***artificially*** broken down your voice into three sections; it's actually a fully integrated system. For example, if you sprain your ankle you'll find your voice deteriorates. Why? Because if you stand 'oddly' you'll find it more difficult to make sure your neck, shoulders and head are in the right places relatively to each other. I've also made it sound quite simple, and in many ways it is, but only once you know what's what.

My last word of advice is quite straight-forward but equally quite strong therefore: treat your voice with respect and take (or make!) any opportunity you can to develop it, particularly at the vulnerable times of change and development, such as looking for, or moving into a new post, working with difficult classes, taking on extra responsibilities, or dealing with a new set of clients (such as governors).

Your voice is your first and best tool as a teacher, so treat it well, but above everything else, remember to enjoy it; it's special and it's unique.

Tips?

Drink water! Yes, I know you've heard it before, but it's true. You might be absolutely gagging for the 'necessary' cup of tea or coffee at break time, but they're not good for your voice as they dry you out. And while we're at it, make sure the water isn't too chilled either; you'd not play a game of squash and rush, sweating and hot into a cold shower, so why expect the muscles of your voice to do the equivalent.

Get some training. Do it before you have a problem and you should avoid getting them. If you *do* suspect you've got a problem, go and see your GP; explain you're a teacher, but be prepared for them not to necessarily understand the demands of your job. If they simply say "talk less" politely explain why that's difficult for you and see what help they can offer you: you may need referring to an Ear, Nose & Throat specialist, or an Speech & Language Therapist. There's every likelihood you're fine, but better safe than sorry.

Use non-verbal signals to get your class's attention so you don't have to fight about the noise. I know teachers who use hand signals, bells, who just stand in a certain part of the classroom or – so she claims – one who turns off the lights!

Try not to breathe in the chalk dust or marker-pen fumes. Similarly, if you're using something like over-head projectors or

computers in your classroom, don't fight them if you can avoid it; simply stand away from them if at all possible. Beware of the dry, hot air they throw out too: you'll need to drink even more and – conceivably – you might want to firm up the habit of breathing in through your nose when you're near them to moisten the air before it goes down your throat towards your lungs. With the increasing use of data-projectors in classrooms these days this is a particularly important bit!

Turn it around. If you find yourself having to work in a room where half your students seem to be in the dim and distant reaches, have a good hard look at the ergonomics of your room. Can you turn it around by 90 degrees? If you can teach in it landscape instead of portrait, your voice won't have to throw so far. (Yes, I know there are other problems in doing this and it's not for everyone, but it's something to think about.....)

Don't resort to microphones. They give you one more thing to worry about, take your mind off your job and – inevitably – make your voice less interesting and flatten out your passion. They also distance you from your students, psychologically and – for some students – simply confuse them because your voice isn't coming from the same place as you're standing. (Of course, if you've got a clinical problem the situation is certainly different, but you get the idea, I'm sure)

Biography

Dr Simon Raybould is a 43 year old voice & presentation skills coach working in the public and commercial sectors. He has backgrounds as a researcher, lecturer, manager and in theatre; a melange which he brings together in his work. His INSET courses are a regular feature of several LEAs ("*It changed my life*" said one attendee in the TES). He is also author of "The Little Big Voice" ("*when you've read this book your voice will become one of your major assets*" says Bev Wear of the British Lung Foundation). He can be contacted by email at voice@curved-vision.co.uk and details of Curved Vision's courses are available online at www.curved-vision.co.uk and www.tellingpeople.co.uk