Can you Hear me at the Back?

*lecturing at the rca*
In Your Own Words is a collection of thematic articles that give an insight into the experience of teaching at the Royal College of Art.

It is designed to provoke thought and discussion on the nature of art and design education within a specialist postgraduate institution.

Can You Hear Me At The Back? 
lecturing at the rca
by David Crowley
and Sir Christopher Frayling
Lectures remain one of widely-used teaching methods in universities and are popular events which draw the public to museums and galleries. But they are hardly the most effective way of delivering information. After all, it would be quicker to read an article. And hard-pressed colleges hold on to this way of delivering information as an ‘economic mode of delivery’. This is hardly a ringing endorsement for the medium.

So what advantages do they offer? First, they bring different people together. With many people gathered in one room, they present a genuine possibility for intellectual exchange. Second, they are events which can contain drama. Yet both of these characteristics are often overlooked by speakers. We’ve all sat in the audience listening to a lecturer talking into his notes, who seems not to have noticed that there is anyone else in the room.

So what makes for a good talk, particularly to artists and designers? Well I don’t claim to have all the answers. But this is what works for me (both as a speaker and as a listener).

**Beginnings and ends**

Hook the audience at the beginning. Good ‘openers’ include anecdotes drawn from everyday life to encapsulate the more abstract themes of the talk or paradoxes which your talk will explore. If you can signal where you are going to be taking the audience (without a ‘plot spoiler’), they will accept any detours which you introduce en route.

Know how long your talk will take to deliver. If you plan a section in which you will extemporise or invite discussion, allow sufficient time for this. Improvised passages often take longer than structured ones to make the same point and yet speakers often think that only a few milliseconds are required.

Running overtime is a cardinal sin in my book: audiences get frustrated; at a conference, the next speaker gets agitated; and, all too often, what should be a thoughtful conclusion becomes an inchoate torrent of words as the speaker dashes to get to the end.
**Images are ideas**

Too often images seem like backdrops for ideas in lectures. Some speakers take it for granted that the audience understands their illustrations in the way that they do. But how can they be sure? Moreover, being led on a ‘tour’ of a work of art or design by a speaker can be a really compelling experience. Sustained description is not just a service: it is a way of shaping an argument.

When I plan my lectures, I select my images first and then organise the talk around them. Well-selected images can do a lot of work for you. Organising them in contrasting pairs, for instance, can draw out the qualities in each.

If the audience is made up of artists and designers, never separate images and ideas. Whenever I hear a speaker say, ‘I’ll run through the images at the end’ before launching into a long monologue, my heart sinks to my feet. By implying that images are secondary, the speaker has not only insulted the image-makers in the room; more importantly, he or she has seriously undervalued the power of images to deliver and encapsulate ideas.

‘PowerPoint’ and other presentation software like ‘Keynote’ contain tools which students like (and aesthetes disdain). It is not hard to understand why. If you caption your illustrations with artist/designers, titles, etc., your audience will be able to follow up the art and design works you’ve shown in the library or on the Internet.

If you are going to quote a dense passage or a key interpretive text, why not treat it as an illustration and project it on the screen? This way, the audience are much more likely to absorb the ideas it contains.

**Are you an expert?**

You are on stage because you have something to say. But are you giving your lecture as an expert authority or a reflective thinker?

Clearly if you are talking about your own artwork or designs you cannot escape the role of expert. That is why you’ve been invited to speak. But for other kinds of talks it is possible to use doubt and uncertainty. For instance, I sometimes structure my talks with a ‘rhetorical turn’. Half way through, after delivering a body of material, I’ll say “I am now going to show you why everything I have said so far is wrong.” If the audience has the sense of ideas being unfolded before them in real time, they feel as if they are at an event. Similarly, being presented with two contrasting interpretations of a single image or event is a provocative experience: it puts the audience in the position of having to make a judgment (or to assess the conclusion which you have proposed).

**You could hear the nerves**

Should you read your script word-for-word? Nerves might mean that you have too. But there are some techniques which can diminish the deadening effect that this can have. If you do write the talk out, make sure that the sentences are short and contain the kind of rhythms of speech. A long sentence with elaborate clauses is a series of hurdles to trip up your tongue.

Make eye contact with the audience. Laying out your talk on the printed page in very short paragraphs, allows you to look up into the room.

If you don’t write the talk out in full (by using bullet points or notes), you’ll have no choice but to employ a ‘natural’ mode of speech. This said, the pace of natural speech is fine for a conversation, but a lecture needs to draw on a wider range of rhetorical techniques. Slowing down or even repeating a phrase or short sentence underscores the importance of a particular idea. If you are feeling like Sir Laurence Olivier and, more importantly, the subject warrants it, silence can even be used for effect.
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I don't get it.
Attention is sustained when the speaker varies the mode of delivery. If you are lecturing from a lectern, move around the room. If the audience has the impression that you are about to embark on a long monologue, they are more likely to drift, so break your talk up. I always try to engage the listeners early on by asking a question (and by demanding an answer). It can be as simple as asking the audience who has seen a particular work of art or design before. The implicit message to audience is this: keep focused, you might be asked to do something or to offer an opinion again.

More importantly—if time allows—solicit the opinions of the audience for the ideas. Reserving a few minutes for questions at the end is, of course, the default format for discussion. But you can shape this slot. If, for instance, you build in questions or ‘problems’ during the course of the lecture, you are setting an agenda for the conversation which follows. Moreover, you should ask yourself what kind of expertise does the audience have? You may be introducing the listeners to an unfamiliar or new subject but they may still have something very insightful to say, if invited. Artists and designers have an enormous visual acuity which can be tapped. Do they agree with your ‘reading’ of an image? Why not ask them?

Ultimately, a well-structured talk which includes powerful images, provocations, opportunities for discussion and disputation can be an exhilarating experience…both for the audience and the speaker.

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An Oxford aesthetics philosopher once gave a course of lectures to the Royal College of Art’s painting students. This was in the 1960s. His lectures were immaculately typed (he read every single word), elegantly argued, and, because he was from a university where the magic lantern has even today to have its full impact, he didn’t bring pictures. At his first lecture, there were forty students; at his second, twenty; at his third, five; and at his final lecture, a solitary painting student (David Hockney according to folklore).

The lecturer turned to the student and said ‘There really doesn’t seem to be much point in going on—why don’t we have a cup of coffee and discuss the lecture?’

‘No, do go on,’ replied the student. ‘I’ve been trying to make a drawing of you for four weeks.’

This has never happened to me—although I did once give an illustrated lecture on ‘Theories of Fashion’ to a large group of postgraduate fashion students in the late Seventies. When asked for their reactions, they shuffled their feet. Then a girl with a multi-coloured hairdo in the front row offered: ‘Didn’t think much o’ your corduroy jacket’.

There’s no doubt that the experience of traditional university lecturing is completely different from the experience of art school or college lecturing (even though school and college are often now parts of universities). It is the difference between an entirely verbal, and an audio-visual presentation. And it is the difference between ‘writing everything down in case it comes in handy at exam time’ and ‘watching and listening in case it provides a stimulus to/inspiration for work in progress’. As the joke goes: if the lecturer says ‘good morning’ to a group of newly-arrived undergraduates at a traditional university, they reply in unison ‘good morning’; if to a group of undergraduates with exams imminent, they write it down. Art students would be a) trying to draw you b) doing an instant semiotic analysis of your clothes or c) looking at the pictures on the screen perhaps while consulting their Blackberrys.
The stereotypical lecture, as seen in popular films, is nearly always a disaster. There is Michael Caine’s Open University tutor falling off the podium because he is drunk in Educating Rita. There is angry, but Lucky Young Jim getting his own back on the boring old members of the Humanities Faculty by letting rip at a public lecture. And there is Art Garfunkel, with a little help from assorted slide projectors placed at strategic points around the room, turning a psychology lecture into performance art in Bad Timing.

There is also Baron Frankenstein (or Dr Jekyll) being hounded out of town by enraged medical students because his lecture-demonstration has pushed back the frontiers a little too far. This demonstration has usually involved a corpse, a galvanometer, some vermicelli, and a pretty young assistant. In real life, though, a science lecturer would seldom give away his latest discoveries in an open lecture to first degree students. He would first stake a claim by publishing them in a refereed journal.

So, if the popular stereotype of the lecture is such a negative one, and if lecturers score more points by researching and publishing, then why does the whole edifice of further and higher education rest upon this 50-minute ritual?

Lectures are not a particularly efficient means of delivering information. When I lectured at Bath University in the mid-Seventies, I once gathered up the notes which students had been dutifully writing for the past half-hour, and discovered that no two students appeared to have been listening to the same lecture. Completely different aspects of the lecture had struck different people as significant.

The lecture depends for its effect, like a theatrical performance, on the relationship between the ‘transmitter’ and the ‘receiver’. It can actually turn the communication of knowledge, as distinct from information, into a very memorable experience. I can still remember some great performances I have seen: A J P Taylor and George Steiner on television, Ernst Gombrich, Jonathan Miller, Huw Weldon and Iris Murdoch live.

This does not happen often enough. Too many career academics read their lectures from notes retrieved from last year’s file.

There is another form of corner-cutting, seen sometimes in the art college sector: too many pictures, not enough words. This can be dangerous, particularly if the lecturer has brought along the wrong Powerpoint. A well-known art critic once gave a lecture on Giacometti illustrated by slides for a lecture on Paul Klee. He realised his mistake but decided to go ahead anyway. Perhaps because the presentation was about abstract ideas, nobody seemed to mind. Or maybe they were too polite to say or more interested in Klee anyway.

These problems are nothing new. But it took the Russian Revolutionaries, in the early Twenties, to think up a solution. Lenin wrote a series of guidelines, intended for ideologically correct young university students which were to be implemented in the event of an ideologically incorrect lecture. Called Ten Questions to a Lecturer, they were appended to Lenin’s treatise Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. For the most effective results they were to be read out, one by one, viva voce, just as the lecturer was getting into his or her stride. Question One—‘What is your theoretical position?’—was followed by the showstopper Question Two: ‘Are you an idealist or a dialectical materialist?’. If the lecturer were to mutter something about ‘I’m not here to be dogmatic, I’m just here to present the examination material to you’, this led to the inevitable: ‘In that case, you must be an idealist’. Idealists, of course, were the lowest form of life in the new Republic. Eventually the hapless academic was driven from the podium.

The point of the exercise according to Lenin, was to force the lecturer to be explicit about the assumptions which lay behind the topics under discussion. And to think hard about the audience when preparing a lecture. His technique, though, probably won’t do the trick in 2009. The lecturer mightn’t even look up, unless to remark: ‘I’m not sure that dialectical materialism is on the syllabus this year’. And most audiences are too polite.
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Some however are not. During a lecture I gave at the RCA on the films of John Ford a few years ago, the assembled students started chanting during one of the extracts from The Searchers ‘Fast Forward! Fast Forward!’ There may not be remote control buttons around the auditorium to fast forward a lecturer, but it was a gentle reminder that it takes two to lecture—the giver and the receiver and that reminder can work miracles.

Information is increasingly—though not necessarily accurately—found on Web sites via search engines. Lectures these days must surely do something else. Maybe because I have worked in art schools for so long, I tend to see these as a form of inspiration—firing the studio students up, so they will want to find out more for themselves or even absorb the material into their own art. In art schools, you can’t always assume that there is a community of interested people sitting out there—and so you have to put over the subject in as engaging a way as possible. This has become second nature to me, over the years. And you have to get used to deafening silence at question time. Few students want publicly to expose themselves in this way in front of their peer group. It is not a hip thing to do. But there are still deep rewards to lecturing in this context. In 1973 I gave a College-wide lecture on ‘Victorian Comics’—illustrated with slides of cheap woodcuts and caricatures. There were no questions and I was a little disconcerted. But six months later I went to the degree show and saw the work of one of the illustration students, whose creative life had evidently been changed by my lecture: her entire display was inspired by my Victorian comics which had been taken in all sorts of new directions. From many years of lecturing in mainstream universities, I had never known a moment of satisfaction or intellectual excitement to match that moment of recognition. I had read countless exam scripts and essays which more or less detailed what I had said in lectures, and the more accurate the memory the higher the grade. But I had never changed someone’s life before. And it has happened since, with various topics and themes. You never know for sure what seeds you are planting.
For me, the key lies in the preparation. Visuals carefully arranged, lectures rehearsed from a text in advance so that the lecturer can talk with passion as if the ideas have just occurred to him/her. Never, ever, read from a prepared paper, like my philosopher of aesthetics. Remember that the lecture is a performance as well as a transmission – and that the students will partly judge it on this basis. Look up, and make eye contact with the back rows, so that the voice will be projected (“like a hose of water coming out of the mouth, in an arc”, an educationalist once told me—using a rather unfortunate simile). And remember, too, that in the era of the mass media, the net, the mega-visual explosion, the lecturer is competing for the students’ attention against very stiff competition.

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