How can I ensure that all students can hear and understand me?

How can I establish feedback loops within my class?

Two elements of teaching can help you energize large classes: attention to self-presentation and incorporation of discussion.

**An Illuminating Experiment**

In 1997, psychology professor, Stephen J. Ceci at Cornell University conducted an experiment (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 3/11/97). He taught one course in exactly the same way he had the previous term – same texts, tests, and grading standards; he changed only one variable – his mode of presentation. He spoke and gestured more enthusiastically.

What was the outcome of this experiment? His students’ opinions of his teaching skyrocketed. Dr. Ceci concluded that one should be suspicious of student evaluations. But surely, his experiment also illustrates the fundamental importance of presentation style in the classroom.

**Presentation and Basic Theatre Exercises**

As a teacher, you must be aware of how you are presenting your material. Physical and vocal energy, clear enunciation, fluid gestures and expressive body language all help you present complex ideas to your students. They are also the stuff of actor training. So why not adapt basic theatre exercises to the needs of the classroom?

Let us review four points:

**Relaxation**

Physical relaxation sets the stage for successful public speaking as well as for performance. Physical tension, in contrast, fosters stage fright. One simple technique that is nonetheless always productive is to take a series of deep, long breaths before you enter the classroom. You will find an increase in your focus and a decrease in any nerves. Further, avail yourself of workshops that teach relaxation and yoga in order to leave your daily concerns at the door.

**Vocal Projection**

When teaching large classes, you must ensure that all students can hear and understand you as you speak. To accomplish this goal, you should focus on your vocal projection. With proper projection even the student furthest from you will hear and understand. How is this accomplished? Most people believe that they must speak loudly in large rooms. However, loudness, as in operatic singing, depends on vowels, which carry sound but not meaning. The secret to projection lies in crisp articulation with special attention paid to consonants.

Choose a passage from a book or newspaper, a poem, anything you like, and read it so slowly that you elongate every vowel and enunciate every consonant. (Pay attention to how mobile your face becomes.) Now speed up your reading without losing clarity in the consonants. This exercise, when practiced daily, develops the habit of good articulation.
Energizing Large Classes

Awareness of Space
Know that, when you speak, you command the entire room, not just the podium behind which you stand. Look out over the crowd and speak to the last person in the last aisle. Consider walking through the room as you speak to encourage the attention of all.

Reactive Attention to the Behavior of the Audience
As you look around the room, catching eyes here and there, begin to build a feedback loop: observe what your listeners are doing. Are they leaning forward, fiddling with their belongings, sleeping, talking? Their behaviors are your cues to adjust and react. You might speed up or slow down, throw in a joke, ask a question, and, afterward, allow for the moment of silence in which your students collect their thoughts.