

Keep it simple



IF YOU REALLY WANT YOUR STUDENTS OR COLLEAGUES TO LISTEN, AND – GASP – ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE SAYING OR WRITING, THE FIRST STEP IS TO KEEP IT SIMPLE, AS **STEVE HOLDEN** EXPLAINS.

Hurray, an educator from an academic background has come out and said – well, written – that to be any good at teaching, or writing for your students or colleagues, you have to keep things simple, or, put simply, unnecessarily complicated talk or writing is poison to good learning.

Put even more simply, keep it simple.

Put otherwise, of course, for those with discursive metapedagogical interests pertaining to the educational subfield in the field of cultural production and indeed reproduction, that is as much as to say that one might attribute an affirming cognisance to the view that the discourse, or indeed discourses, of pedagogically-oriented and socioinstitutionally-situated inter-relations need not, or indeed ought not, be inherently complex or unnecessarily arcane and that inherently complex or indeed unnecessarily arcane discourse, or indeed discourses, has, or indeed have, approximal proxy toxicity in respect to optimally-effective pedagogic events, sorta.

Keeping it a bit simpler, Gerald Graff, associate dean of curriculum and instruction in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois in Chicago, says, 'Simplification is not only crucial in

teaching beginning students but...also a necessary aspect of any effective intellectual communication, even when we address other experts in our fields.'

The problem, according to Graff, is 'the belief – found inside and outside academia – that academic communication is fundamentally different from everyday vernacular discourse.' It doesn't have to be, he argues.

Before you rush off and start teaching everything as though you're doing the Macarena, though, take a look at Graff's nine do's and don'ts when it comes to talking with or writing for your students and colleagues. It doesn't have to be *too* simple.

1. 'Be dialogical. Begin...by directly identifying the prior conversation or debate that you are entering.'

2. Make your claim or point explicit, using a phrase like, 'My claim here is...' As Graff notes, 'You don't have to use such a phrase, but if you can't do so you're in trouble.'

3. Periodically remind your students or colleagues of that claim or point.

4. 'Summarise the objections that you anticipate can be made, or that have been made, against your claim.'

5. Explain explicitly why the claim or point is important. Assume a student or col-

league will ask, 'So what?' Again, you don't *have* to ask that yourself, but if you did and couldn't answer it, you're in trouble.

6. Remember that your talk or writing really works on two levels, one where you make your point and a second where your 'metacommentary' explains to your students or colleagues how and how not to take it, using phrases of the 'What I'm saying' or 'What I'm not saying' variety.

7. Since we can process only one claim or point at a time, there's no use trying to squeeze in secondary and tertiary claims or points – aka keep it simple, stupid. If your secondary and tertiary claims or points are important, make them in due course.

8. Be bilingual. 'Whenever you have to say something in academese, try to say it in the vernacular as well.'

9. 'Don't kid yourself. If you could not explain it to your parents or your most mediocre student' – Graff's cute comparison, not mine – 'the chances are you don't understand it yourself.'

10. You thought there were nine, but let me add a 10th: Apply the in-50-words-or-fewer-and-you-could-win-a-trip-for-two rule.

And remember, if you talk with and write for your students and colleagues in a way that they understand, there's a good chance that your words will actually matter. **T**

REFERENCES

Graff, G. (2003). *Clueless in Academe: How schooling obscures the life of the mind*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

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This month's Last Word was written in arcane and convoluted prose – before being simplified by a harsh subeditor – by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, and the 2008 highly commended winner in the Best Columnist category of the Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards for the Last Word.