

Pedagogy of the Talk Show Hosts and Hostesses

By Denise Heinze

When I was growing up in the '60s and early '70s, some of the best teachers I had—and I pause for fear of the ridicule this disclosure may heap on my head—were talk show hosts. I've learned more about teaching from Phil and Oprah than I have from Socrates and Rosenblatt.

The most skilled practitioners of a highly maligned genre, Donahue and Winfrey are not to be confused with the carnival barkers who parade humanity's worst calamities before our eyes, enticing them to chair-banging and nose-busting ferocity. Though Donahue and Winfrey were not above such theatrics, especially in their salad days, they often elevated the talk show to respectable, even admirable heights.

Certainly, their celebrity has left an indelible mark on television history, yet little attention has been directed toward their effective pedagogy, so compelling that over a span of decades they commanded

the attention of millions of viewers for an hour every single day.

The father of the modern talk show, Phil Donahue revolutionized the genre with his energetic and interactive style, inviting his audience to do something few other talk shows had done—contribute to (for want of a better metaphor) class discussion.

Donahue effectively ended the interview format that had grown dim and tiring. No longer a two-way dynamic of host and guest, the talk show discussion became multi-directional, often achieving the scaffolding that educational theorists claim is a part of optimal learning.

While Donahue might begin with a topic such as inter-racial marriage, he quickly learned that by including the audience in the discussion, there was no predicting what direction his show would ultimately take. In the early years, this often meant shouting, chaos, and even violence. Probably as a result

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of these types of free-for-alls, the Donahue show became a huge success, very much a prototype for the “Jerry Springer Show.”

But as Donahue matured, so did his program, evolving into one of the most timely and controversial on television. Donahue learned, as all good teachers do, how to control the energy of the group without stifling participation.

Taking on every subject imaginable, from transexuality to cloning to communism, he demanded that everyone contribute to the business of learning. But Donahue gradually grew crotchety, acerbic, and even nasty. His fall from grace was precipitated by his own increasing arrogance and disregard for the opinions of his audience—the very people whose input made him a success. Donahue forgot the premise of good teaching that he had so masterfully cultivated: the teacher does not know everything. The talk show was about to advance to the next stage.

Oprah Winfrey adapted much of the Donahue formula but introduced spirited, friendly exchange, and compassionate, non-judgmental listening far more engaging than the “prosecutorial style” of her predecessor.

Winfrey embraced people physically and emotionally in unconditional love and consequently moved

them to unflinching confession and naked insight. The hallmark of Winfrey’s fame: her willingness to bring the personal into the public.

Millions of Americans know that her best friend is Gail, her boyfriend is aptly named Steadman, and that her spiritual mother is Maya Angelou. Her viewers are familiar with her passions for sweet potato pie, reading, and justice for child abuse victims—because she was one.

Through the years, the Oprah Winfrey show has become a documentary of her life, in which she grappled with weight, relationships, success, discrimination, health, and spirituality.

She places herself squarely in the midst of her audience members, whose opinions she not only respects, but craves as a way to understand her own angst in the world. Her role as an educator is fluid; she slides from the center to the periphery, willing to devolve the responsibility of learning onto her audience. The creation of knowledge, then, becomes a collective urge for the truth.

As a result, Oprah Winfrey has become a phenomenon, her show transcending an exploitation of the downtrodden and perverse to some of the most instructive and enlightening television on the air. She has interviewed the leading figures of the day, including Toni Morrison,

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Nelson Mandela, Hillary Clinton, Alice Walker, and Deepak Chopra. She created a book club that has not only inspired millions of viewers to read with her, but has become a windfall for the authors she selects.

A few years ago, she risked her reputation and career on a new theme, "Change Your Life," a form of instruction in nascent spirituality. While she has lost some market share as a result of her recent ventures, most of her audience stays with her. They do what she asks because first and foremost she is a trusted friend, courageous enough to admit her imperfections, doubts, and limitations. But this vulnerability ironically adds to her influence and authority.

One flippant comment about burgers and she leaves a purple bruise on the cattle industry. She asks for a healthier potato chip and Lays nearly confiscates Idaho to produce it. Though the show is hers, she refuses to be the ultimate authority; that responsibility falls to her constituents.

When she recommended Morrison's difficult novel *Paradise*, her faithful read it but grumbled. She listened and adjusted the reading list so that the next selection was not necessarily less intellectually challenging, but more accessible.

A natural born teacher, Winfrey continues to respect and enjoy

her followers in an infectious and joyous manner.

Now, having sung the praises of the best of the daytime dialogic, it would be prudent to acknowledge the rather obvious differences between a television talk show and a college classroom. One provides entertainment, the other an education. One depends on high ratings to survive, the other does not. One creates a star system to create a following, the other develops a solid reputation. For one, politics and finance can determine its survival, while the other is free from such external influences.

If you are having trouble telling which is which, chances are you have already anticipated my analysis. If not, you may well benefit, as I have in my own teaching, by recognizing the link between these seemingly disparate arenas and incorporating the best of the talk show into the lecture hall.

Learning is effectively a form of entertainment. If it weren't, most people wouldn't bother. Even the stark college classroom offers the potential for the sublime. The most inept bore cannot destroy the sheer delight of Chaucer's pilgrimage or the wonder and terror of the splitting atom.

Of course, if the inept bore does not change his or her ways, the class will most likely grow smaller,

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less significant—perhaps irrelevant—and disappear.

That's because curriculum is dependent on a ratings and star system. Poor student evaluations affect tenure, promotion, raises, reputation—and social status.

After all, there's something distinctly distasteful about a bad teacher—that business about external manifestations of inner malaise. By contrast, a fine professor, one who bounds into the classroom instead of mumbling “once more into the breach,” becomes a campus celebrity, sought after by hordes of students, envious faculty, and ambitious administrators.

If this professor publishes often and well, he becomes a star, doing photo shoots with the likes of Camille Paglia. While the big names in academia, just as in Hollywood, are not as susceptible to the vicissitudes of politics and money, most college professors are all too familiar with how budget shortfalls and an angry group of local ministers can affect what they teach. For us, academic freedom is just another word for everything to lose.

But what about the intangibles of teaching? Professors and students form relationships that last a lifetime, born of a love for shared knowledge and the search for wisdom. Compare this with the superficial, iconoclastic attachment to a

television image.

And yet, in a number of surveys, Oprah Winfrey was voted the person most people would like to sit next to on an exercise bike, or some other such nonsense. We may never see or speak to any of our college professors again, yet we are inundated with the most intimate details of a celebrity's life. It is no exaggeration to say that, as a culture, we mourned more for the loss of Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy Jr. than, say, Uncle Fay from Toledo.

A college professor works on the inverse ratio model of salary—the more one loves one's job, the less one should make. That logic has been used repeatedly to justify the disgraceful salaries paid to teachers. Talk show hosts, even the worst ones, earn the equivalent of the entire budget of a small school system.

The apparent conclusion to be drawn from this is that a professor teaches for the love of it, while a talk show host just wants the money. Of course, anyone who has ever been in a departmental lounge for a long as 15 minutes knows that this is not necessarily true. Professors are very much concerned with making money; they just aren't any good at it.

Surely the bottom line in distinguishing a class from a program is

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its mission—to provide an education. That single fact would seem to obviate this argument, not because talk shows don't educate—because they do—but because the student's behavior is dictated by the expectations of the medium.

Students attend college supposedly because they want a degree and then a good job. In order to get what they want, they must go to class and do the required oral and written work.

To enjoy a show, they just grab the remote. If they can't stomach Sally Jesse, they channel surf with strobe-light rapidity. Because no grades are required, they are free to absorb what they like and adore or despise the host with impunity. But is this so very different from college?

Students frequently go shopping—finding the classes or professors that suit their needs. I have heard graduating seniors brag at their ability to custom-design curriculum around the most difficult classes and professors.

As for grades acting as a guarantee to student learning, we all have been disabused of that myth at one time or another. A former colleague of mine, an ex-priest turned medievalist, once remarked that his attendance at graduation was penance for the sins paraded before him.

The point of this comparison is

not to disavow that there is something inherently divine about the college classroom; it just isn't always evident to the student. A professor cannot assume his or her mere doctoral presence, overabundance of knowledge, and power to grant three college credits is sufficient to carry the day.

Oprah doesn't have a Ph.D. Neither does she possess a major attribute of female celebrity—ideal beauty. Yet, she has gently nudged her viewers to levels of attendance, participation, and performance that professors could only dream about. She has millions reading, writing in daily gratitude journals, volunteering for her Angel Network, sending her thousands of letters, even working on their souls. What she and other talk show hosts do to generate this level of engagement is worthy of at the very least a grudging nod of respect.

In my own teaching, I constantly tinker with presentation and curriculum. The dynamics of my classroom are as critical to me as the substance. The two are not mutually exclusive. Yet I despair when academics continue to antagonize the two.

An effective lesson depends as much on how it's presented as it does on what happens to be the offering of the day. A brilliant theo-

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rist is not automatically a good teacher, just as a clown may not be a bad one. This is not to suggest that a professor must become the organ grinder's monkey.

One of my favorite classes in college was taught by a psychology professor who had a profound stutter. His beautifully resonant voice periodically got caught in a loop. He would get stuck so long on, for instance, the first syllable of Piaget, you could feel the silent energy of the class, collectively gripping desks, urging him on.

Though this happened several times in the course of a 75-minute class, it did not detract from his effectiveness. Extremely intelligent and knowledgeable, the professor was also personable, most interesting, and, because of the stutter, endearing. His willingness to undress himself daily to dozens of smug, immature students taught us volumes about the psychological complexity of the human being and the courage of one man. In his case, the messenger was the medium.

Anecdotal evidence abounds to document exciting, stimulating teaching. But it is extremely difficult to convert style and personality to a science. As a loquacious colleague of mine once said, "If you ain't got it, you ain't got it."

What "it" involves a multitude of factors, some of which are abstract and even contradictory.

Interpersonal skills, public speaking, performance, and class management are rarely taught to doctoral students, who are often thrown into college composition classes with little more than a textbook and an enigmatic grin.

Though I minored in education and was a high school teacher for three years, I learned next to nothing in my education courses and had no mentoring as a novice. Still, when I went back to school to get my master's degree and then doctorate, I was equipped with more than most of my fellow graduate students who didn't have the first clue how to teach. Besides, I had my ace in the hole. I watched those talk shows.

While we may not admit it literally, we figuratively acknowledge our role as performers and public speakers. The first day of the fall semester is so linguistically sodden with theatrical metaphor, you'd think it was opening night on Broadway. The new assistant professor hears, "Knock 'em dead." "Break a leg." "You'll wow 'em."

Older, more experienced heads speak after the fact. "Have you been on yet?" "How did it go?" Responses vary from "They sat on their hands," "I flopped" or "They were cheering in the aisles."

The first professor to make me

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conscious of the performance aspect of teaching was the director of the writing program at Duke. He spent several days in the fall with incoming graduate assistants exposing us to his unique methodology of teaching writing and the dynamics of pedagogy.

Like an acting coach, he introduced us to the rudiments of voice, elocution, tone, pitch, volume, body language, eye contact, movement, and pace. Though I had intuitively practiced most of what he told us, he validated my desire to improve on this aspect of my teaching, which I have been nearly obsessed with for the past 20 years.

A typical opening day class for me begins with my arriving a minute or two late. This gives students a chance to scout around for a seat, eyeball other students, and settle in for the main event. I stride in, smile at the anxious unlined faces, and advance to my desk. There, I fiddle around with briefcase, record book, lecture notes, allowing students a chance to gawk at me.

In these initial moments, students are reading me like semioticians, wondering as Stanley Fish might if there is a text in this teacher. I hope they notice that I appear organized and efficient. More likely, they are critiquing my fashion sense. Every professor who

has ever had a nylon run or a zipper out of the lock position knows how closely students scrutinize appearance, every single class.

They could care less what you are saying in the first few seconds because they are focused on that nifty bow tie or those cool bellbottoms that you've had for 25 years but are back in style.

After the perusal, I write my name on the board and introduce myself. I tell them my educational background, teaching responsibilities, and area of expertise. All the while I am conscious of speaking clearly, projecting my voice into space, making eye contact, and moving freely about the room.

I am neither gesticulating wildly nor covering behind the podium. My brief biography finished, I then learn their names. This takes about 10 minutes depending on how many students, are in the class. It is relatively easy to do, an efficient use of time, and always impresses the students, who are amazed—even though they really shouldn't be—at my ability and desire to learn their names so quickly.

Using mnemonic devices, I attempt to make a connection between name and appearance. It goes something like this:

“I want to learn your names now, so please be patient and quiet. I will be staring at each of you for a few seconds, not because I'm preda-

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tory, but because I'm trying to think up a way to remember your name. And you are?"

"John Smith."

"OK. John Smith." I start to panic. The student looks about as generic as his name. I only have a few seconds and John Doe pops into my head. Not fair, but it will work.

"Ok, John, I've got it. And your name is?"

"John Adams."

I sigh and wince. The students chuckle. John Adams blushes. What now?

"Thanks a lot," I say. "And you had to sit next to each other?" More laughter now as I scrounge for something. Oh! He looks like the family lawyer, John Adams. And so it goes until all names are learned. After I'm finished with each student, I repeat all the names from memory. The effect is remarkable. Students are visibly pleased and gratified.

After the memorization, a portion of the first class is given over to the syllabus. If students have already attended several other classes on their schedule, the syllabus is a tough sell, but I try to avoid a dry rendition of rules and regulations by interspersing humor and encouraging any number of questions. It is a critical part of the class even though it has little to do with subject matter.

In addition to appearance and presentation, my expectations, outlined in the syllabus, solidify the climate of my classroom. Students know by the time I've finished that they will be working very hard, they will be expected to behave in a mature and responsible fashion—I actually include rules of etiquette for freshpersons—and that their education is not an entitlement but a civic and personal duty.

With the time left, I love to throw a provocative question or stimulating exercise at my students, give them five minutes to free write, and then get a discussion going.

In an intro to lit class, I may ask them to define a poem in prose or poetry. I then have them read their responses. This exercise works extremely well for both extroverts who use it as a launching pad and introverts who are grateful to have something to read from.

In a composition class, I have asked students to write a one-paragraph description of their physical appearance. I then collect the unsigned prose, redistribute it, have students read each other's response, and then guess who the author is.

In literature classes, one of my favorite questions is, "What is a classic?" This is a question that may not be answered in this mil-

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lennium let alone the tail end of a general ed class, but it sends students out of the room thoughtful and perplexed, exactly where you want them, for a good four years, anyway.

Thus, after one class, students have learned next to nothing about mapping or Anne Bradstreet or deconstruction, but they have learned a lot about how I teach. The amount of energy I expend engages an audience. But the amount of energy I demand creates a community.

Building on this tenuous and fragile bond is an exhausting semester-long endeavor requiring planning, effective management, creativity, vision, and passion. A talk show host has a large staff and an enormous amount of money to ensure that much of this happens, but a professor has only her wits.

First and foremost, I am adamant that students contribute as much to the learning in the class as I do. I lecture for 30 minutes or less and then involve students the rest of the way. Class discussion takes place almost every time.

This is probably the most difficult component of teaching, though it requires little more than good interpersonal skills and an active mind. The active mind part is a given; that's what the Ph.D. is sup-

posed to guarantee. But the interpersonal skills are another matter.

A fellow doctoral student at Duke observed my freshman writing class once and wondered how I got my students to contribute so readily.

"I just shut up," I told him.

This sounds remarkably easy, though we all know in practice that it is not. Listening to students requires enormous patience, especially when what comes out of their mouths can be powerful enough to trigger latent psychosis.

But, of course, it is not just a matter of staying quiet. The most skilled practitioners, in my opinion, are, again, the talk show hosts. Their job is to generate talk and most of them are adept at it. They begin by introducing the subject matter, just as we would in a lecture. The host then typically interviews an expert or two who elaborate on the topic at hand.

While college professors do not have access to the leading thinkers of the day, they have their thoughts in texts, which often is the basis for lecture. Thus, in both forums the dispensing of knowledge is fundamental.

What happens next in a talk show should also be an important function of the classroom. The host turns to the audience and seeks input. It is startling how infrequently professors do this. Even if

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they surrendered only five minutes per class to questions, that would at least allow students some measure of active engagement.

But just giving up time will not ensure any of this. Once the audience is involved, the results can range from the disastrous to the exhilarating. The TV host must successfully orchestrate audience comments within a strict time constraint. This involves creating a discussion that is multi-directional.

At the beginning of the show, the discussion is a two-way dynamic between host and guest. But when audience members comment and question, the directional flow must change, or the show grinds to a halt. An audience member can talk to a guest, but if the exchange becomes exclusive, the host will soon step in so that others may respond, not just to the guest, but to each other.

Soon, the talk has grown from a chat between host and guest to a larger discussion in which all parties are talking to each other. If this sounds like a formula for chaos, it can be, if the host relinquishes control. Indeed, the key to Jerry Springer's success is his calculated willingness to allow talk to escalate into violence.

By contrast, Winfrey establishes ground rules explicitly and implicitly that shape the nature and direction of the talk. She moves

in and out of the forum at will, redirecting questions and deftly cutting off irrelevant, insulting, or long-winded remarks. She encourages articulate or passionate or thoughtful voices to facilitate her group talk.

In my classroom, I either put in print or state verbally what is and is not permissible in discussion. I have no qualms about the First Amendment because what I censor is equivalent to yelling "fire" in a crowded theater—insults, incendiary remarks, or practiced resistance.

If students transgress, I put a stop to it, although the discourse continues. I also try not to commit the cardinal sin—to respond personally to all the questions and comments my students submit. This is surely the death of discussion, because no one else is allowed in.

Instead, I follow a question with a question, "Who wants to answer that?" For a comment, I will either link it to another one—"Oh, so how do you see Emily Grierson differently than Sam does?" Or, I ask others to respond to each other: "What do you think about what Christie just said?"

Soon, students know that I do not own the rights to the transcript. This became painfully clear to me in computer lab with my

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comp class when I arranged our first online chat, which was about argumentative writing. The students virtually ignored me and generated one of the most vigorous class debates I have witnessed as a teacher. I realized that my job was more to monitor and facilitate rather than dominate.

In addition to borrowing from the stylistics of a talk show host, I try to plan curriculum like a program manager, scheduling a variety of activities, including lecture, in-class writings, large and small group discussions, oral presentations, quizzes, guest lecturers, multimedia, and field trips.

I must keep it fresh, because if the class seems stale to me, it will be noticeably mildewed to my students. I take risks and inevitably stumble and bumble around, but I never stop experimenting.

In one general ed American lit class a few years ago, I brought in a picture of Fredrick Douglass and asked students to identify him. When someone shouted out, "That's Don King," I reconsidered a career in day trading.

In another literature class, students were reading *Cold Mountain*, and for a change of pace, I gave them a short answer quiz in which each answer would begin with the letters in the title of the novel. Not

only was it nearly impossible to make up, it was so difficult only a few students passed it, even though they had all been diligent about the reading. I theatrically tossed the quiz over my shoulder and told them to follow suit.

But I have had a number of quite gratifying successes, too. In all of my classes, I require students to write to a real audience—whether in the form of a letter to the editor, an application to an awards committee, or a conference panel presentation. Like a proud parent, I have thrilled at the success of numerous composition students who see their letters in print, graduate students who present at professional conferences, and two undergraduates whose papers were accepted at the National Undergraduate Research Conference.

In addition to writing, I require various other forms of participation. For instance, in literature courses, students have to memorize and recite a poem of eight lines or more.

It's quaint and old-fashioned, but sometimes that's good. I have had many students choose much longer poems, even write their own. Students in all my classes must give an oral presentation, which I

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tell them is the soft spot in an otherwise rigorous and standard list of requirements.

They can present their author or subject matter in any way they choose as long as they do not resort to profanity, pornography, or silliness. Their efforts are easily the best parts of my classes, ranging from video documentaries, to dramatic and musical performance, to extensive research into biography and criticism.

At the end of the semester in literature classes, I forgo the traditional form of final exam review and play a type of “Jeopardy” instead. The students supply the questions—and the answers, if they want to win. The game gets so heated, I have to hose students down periodically or it would turn into pandemonium, something I never had to worry about in a formal review when hosing would have been more effective in keeping them awake.

One of my greatest successes was to take those students reading *Cold Mountain* to the actual locale in western North Carolina, near where the university is located. It was not easy to do. We careened

through winding mountain roads in two rickety school vans and found the entrance to the mountain in a remote section of the Pisgah National Forest. Though we only tramped about half a mile up the trail, we were awash in our own bravado and camaraderie. How does one document what we learned about that novel on one glorious November morning?

What I’m after is not a ratings sweep. I do not create gimmicks and enticements in hopes that students will come to class. They must be present, have read “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” and muster some interest in the colonial version of extreme verbal abuse.

I have various means to ensure this level of preparation, and there are no loopholes for slackers. But before I go too far myself in parroting the rhetoric of Jonathan Edwards, let me say that for their efforts I try to create the most interesting, stimulating environment possible. If that means I do business with the devil—how some see television—so be it, for the classroom must prevail as the greatest show on earth. ■