SPEECH 75: THE BIGGI

Introduction to Speech Communications is probably the only class on Campus with a password.

"With 1,200 kids in the class, I was at a disadvantage," says Dr. Paul Nelson, associate professor of speech and director of Speech 75. "I'd walk around Campus, and students would give me that look of recognition, but they wouldn't say anything. They all knew me, but there was no way that I could know them. So, the first day of class I told them to say '75' when they saw me.

"Now, I'm being '75ed' to death.

"I was in the shower at the gym, and the guy in the next shower waved and said, '75.' I was in a clothing store getting measured for a pair of pants, and the clerk looked up and said, '75.' When students phone, they greet me and sign off with '75.' You have to build in ways to make a class that size personal."

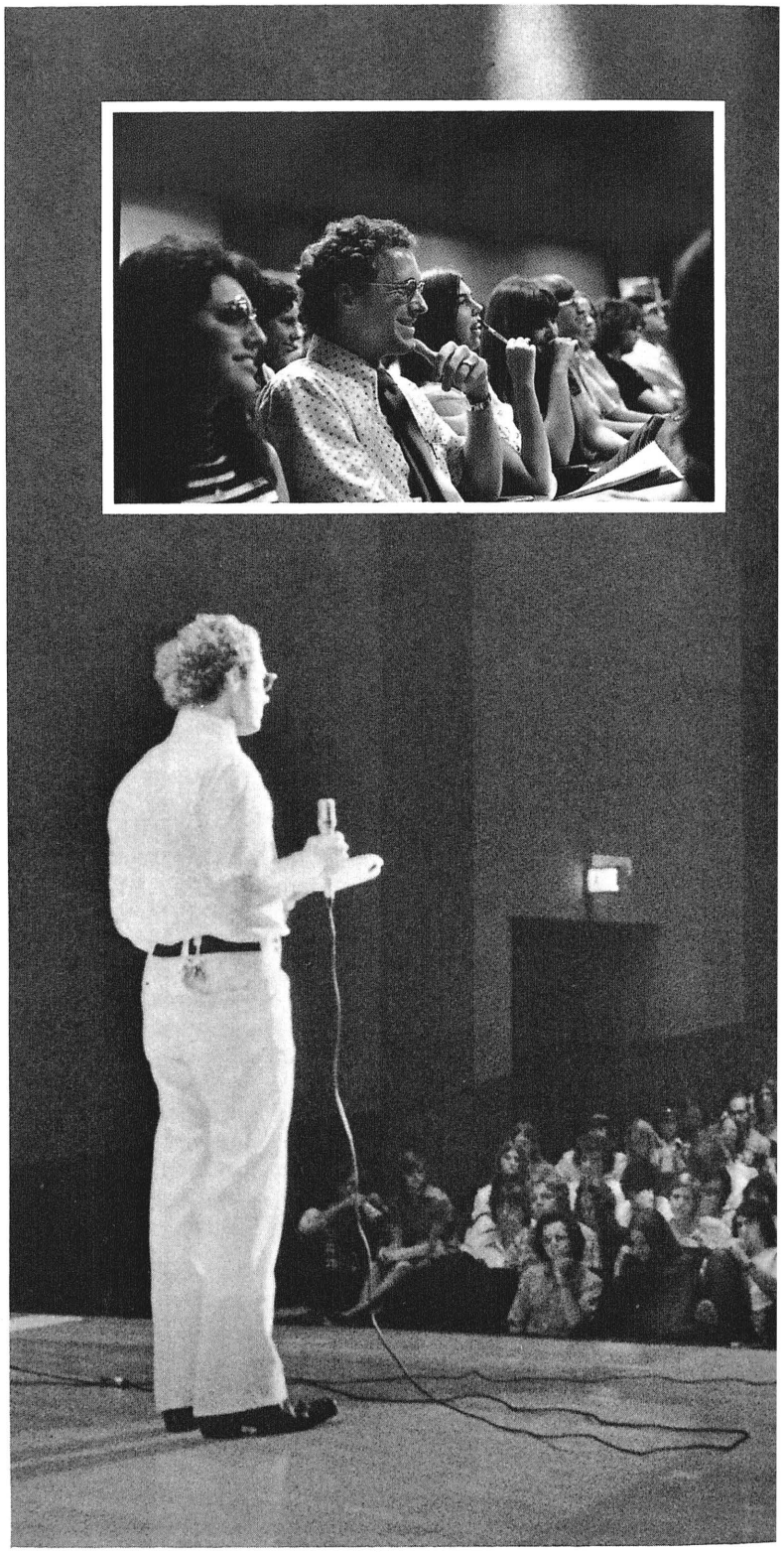
Nelson must be doing something right. When he started teaching the course seven years ago, virtually nobody took it unless he had to. The course is now required by about eight schools and colleges, but not by the College of Arts and Science. About 300 A&S students enrolled this semester, however, so "we know they are volunteers," Nelson says.

It's hard to make a class of 1,200 personal, but Dr. Paul Nelson's strategies succeed.

Nelson used to tape TV lectures for the class. "It was a cheap way to run a show," he says. "Maybe you ought to teach surgery by TV, so each student can see the incision and the palpitating heart, but I just stood there and talked. It was terrible. Students deserve a live human being," he believes.

Several years ago, he began to lecture in person, but no one room large enough to hold the total class was available, so he gave the same lecture over and over to groups of about 300. Last year, he requested Jesse Hall Auditorium, and since then, he's been "trying to figure out ways to take advantage of the large audience."

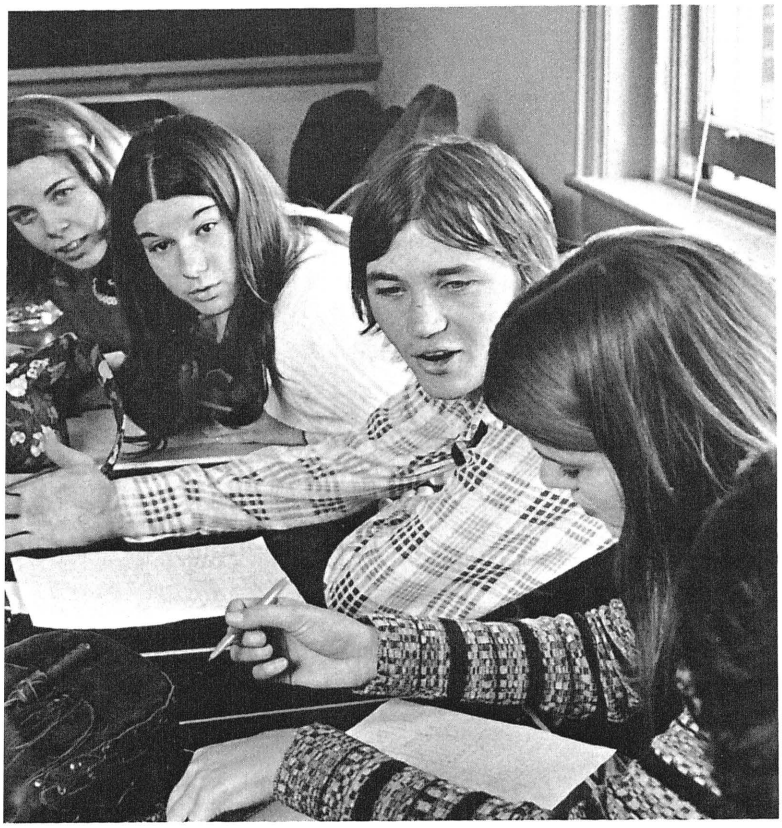
Nelson doesn't just teach Speech 75; he directs it.



Usually in the spotlight, Nelson sometimes joins the audience to enjoy a demonstration by several graduate teaching assistants.

EST CLASS ON CAMPUS

By Anne Baber



In a lab "game," students see effects of competition on trust or honesty. (Above L-R), Tricia Uhlmeyer, Kay Cooley, Roy Clark, and Donna Kendrick cooperate to win. (Below), Paul Griffin and Nina Travers discuss strategies.

There's a difference. He's got an associate director, Karen Chapman, and 22 teaching assistants, who teach the 50 lab sections. The TA's all have master's degrees and are working on PhD's.

The course is designed to help students understand the process of communication as it functions in inter-personal, dyadic (one-to-one), small group, speaker-to-audience, and mass communication.

Nelson and the staff start working on the class even before the semester begins in the fall. During a week-long orientation, new staff get acquainted with Campus, the speech department, the resources available for the labs, and they even hear about some research "profiles" of University freshmen.

Impact, feedback, eye contact, sense deluge and multi-media are Nelson's big-class bywords.

As the curtain goes up on Speech 75's "opening night," the organization and orientation pay off. For the first five minutes, students view a slide show created as a special project by former *Missouri Alumnus* photographer Nick Decker, who took "75" last summer. A boy and girl holding hands, two old men visiting on a park bench, a girl on a bike signaling a turn—reminding the students that people communicate all day everyday in hundreds of ways.

Nelson used to let people sit where they wanted, but "that made them feel more anonymous." Now each TA has "his rows." TA's were told in their orientation, "Know the names and faces of your students. It only takes a few minutes, and students are very fond of instructors who care enough to know who they are." After a few lab sessions, the TA's can greet each student by name as he sits down in his seat at the Jesse lecture.

TA's give their students handouts explaining the lecture's objectives. The handouts help the students take good notes, too.

The lecture may include a carefully rehearsed demonstration, or role playing or a playlet, starring selected TA's. "One advantage of the large class is that I can put forth our very best people," Nelson says.

Recently, five TA's did a demonstration of a small group making a decision. Students could see the dy-

namics of the small group and watch the struggle for leadership.

"It's really hard to get any feedback in a class this big," Nelson says. "Only the gutsiest of people will stand up and yell a question in front of a thousand other people."

After each lecture about 80 students fill out "evaluation sheets" that tell Nelson how the lecture went across.

To get instant reactions and eye contact "like you get in a small class," Nelson often asks some students to sit on stage. They also participate in demonstrations and exercises, and sometimes they are instructed to "sit there and imagine what kinds of questions everybody in the audience would like to ask, then ask 'em!"

Each semester, about 60 to 80 students will have sat on stage. After the first test, Nelson used the 17 people who got A's in an on-stage demonstration.

No student is stuck in the middle of the balcony all term. Everybody plays a giant game of musical chairs at least twice during the semester. Those up front move to the back.

In addition to getting feedback and making each student feel like he's an important person, Nelson also believes that a big class can have a big impact that's just not possible in a small classroom.

In one lecture, students were subjected to a "sense deluge" with sound, slides, and movies—some shown on the side walls of the auditorium. Everything happened at once—a movie on the corn borer, and another one on three ways to dart a dress, music, slides, and talking. The purpose of the multi-media blitz was to help students understand "selective perception," the idea that each of us picks things out of our total sensory input to remember.

After the show, students were given a quiz asking the theme of the presentation.

"It blows their minds," Nelson says. "But they will remember that they 'saw' only a fraction of the show—that part that was relevant to them—that their perception was selective."

It wouldn't be feasible to take the time to create such a show for a small class or to rent and set up the projectors for 50 small classes, Nelson explains. "That's a big advantage of bigness—the impact you can make."

All the TA's have prior teaching experience. Some have taught longer than Nelson, who finished his PhD in speech at the University of Minnesota in 1968. Depending on the personality and expertise of the lab instructor, the labs range from really exciting to deadly dull.

For some students, giving a speech is torture. Last year, Karen Chapman developed a six-week "reticent speakers" program. It usually turns quivering masses of terrified jelly into competent, if not eager speakers, she claims. Students who volunteer spend an hour a week in a group of 8-12. The procedure is the same that's used to teach someone not to fear heights, or shots, or dogs or tests. Students learn to relax and then begin to think about the feared situation, first from some distance. ("Think about somebody else getting up to give a speech. Yours isn't due for a week yet.") Each time the student feels his anxiety and fear begin to rise, he practices relaxing. Finally, he can think about actually giving a speech and can control his fear.

Nelson worries about the students' grades. "We're talking about improving students' ability to relate to other people. How can we grade on that? What kind of harm can you do to a person if you say he is only a "C" person in relating? You can make that into a self-fulfilling prophecy. He may go around the rest of his life saying to himself, 'I'm only a "C"

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in communicating with people.'"

Few students get D's or F's. "They almost have to try," Nelson says. The class average is a 2.7. And Nelson tries to make it clear they are not grading personality.

The class has changed Jim Gibson. "What I've gotten out of this class isn't determined by the test score," says the junior in agriculture. "I see a lot that I'm doing out in life, and I see that other people have these same problems. This class builds your self-concept. You begin to see that small talk is necessary and to look forward to interaction with others. Even if I don't get a good grade, the self assurance I have developed is well worth the time invested. Sure, it's a required course, but I don't think of that. It's relevant, that's the word. I get a 'down on feeling' in the lecture. It has to do with you." □