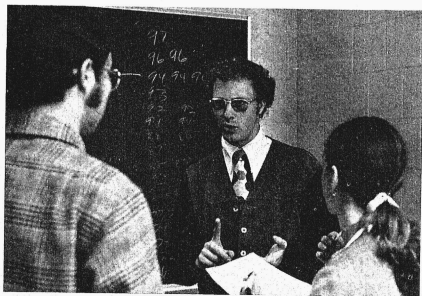




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Above. Seated with students in a circle, Dr. Paul Nelson's hands catch a point and hold it with the students' attention. Counterclockwise: He listens closely, explains tests and keeps smiling with students.





UNICATES

"I guess I like the idea that you ought to be very unsure of yourself, very open to other ideas," Paul Nelson says. As an associate professor in speech and dramatic arts, Nelson has spent four years on Campus impressing students and faculty alike with his enthusiastic and creative approach to teaching.

Saluting his efforts to be relevant, his Contemporary American Speakers class last year staged a mock "This Is Your Life — Paul Nelson" performance.

"You are the speech professor with an inventive outlook and a reddish beard. You are a master in your field. You communicate. You relate to your students," they said.

In 1971, the Central States Speech Association named him "The Outstanding Teacher of 1971." *Savitar*, the Campus yearbook, featured him as one of its outstanding teachers. And these honors were capped this fall by Nelson's selection for an Alumni Association Faculty-Alumni Award.

"I've ended up getting these teaching awards, and I'm not exactly sure why," Nelson says. "But I do know there aren't many teachers who ask the students what they want to learn."

More than 1,150 students take Speech 175. It is required for most education majors. When Nelson began teaching the course, the first thing he did was to turn off the television lectures. He and his teaching assistants do the talking.

Nelson's only rule for lectures is that anything that can be written down and handed out, should be. The lecture is reserved for demonstrations and illustrations, not just terms.

Students enjoy the speech course since Nelson adopted the live lectures. "We learn concepts, not just terms," one student says. "There's no busy work, and it's not a boring television lecture. If you have to take a course, it ought to be like speech."

"The students never know what's coming," Nelson says, with a gleam in his eyes. "In our course, they get a variety of ideas. Some of the class meetings are not even lectures — they're happenings."

That emphasis on remaining open and flexible spills into the Contemporary Speakers class. "Two thirds of the class is predictable," he says. "The other third surprises even me." Nelson, unlike most other professors, does not draw up a class syllabus until the second or third week of the semester so he can fit the course to the students who are enrolled. The class is limited to 25, but is so popular the waiting list has stretched to 70.

"We look at contemporary issues, and then the class chooses one to study extensively," Nelson says. Last year, for example, one topic was privacy. When the class talked about political extremists, Nelson asked a member of the John Birch Society to speak. When they studied persuasive speaking, he invited a door-to-door insurance salesman to give his pitch.

Though his top priority now is teaching, that wasn't always true. "I even changed colleges once because I didn't want to be a preacher or a teacher," Nelson says, laughing. "But I sort of grew to like it. There's a lot of personal gratification in being responsible for a class and its success."

He takes this responsibility seriously. Nelson often stays in his office until 10 or 11 p.m. Besides spending time on his classes, he serves on several University committees. He was instrumental in setting up the first Arts and Science Intersession program held between semesters last January. He is a member of the University Black Studies and Ethnic Minority Committees.

During his office hours, students from his classes, students whom he advises, and faculty members stream in to talk. In between, Nelson may be on the phone talking to volunteer Democratic Party workers (He's a precinct captain.) or to a fellow member of his church ("I've preached some rip-roaring sermons on racism."). Nelson is also president of Project Equality in Columbia, a group that promotes equal employment opportunities.

Involvement with issues led to a class project in Nelson's Public Speaking class when his students gave speeches to the faculty and got more than 1,000 students to sign a petition in favor of the pass-fail system of grading. Students now have a choice of grading systems.

"They learned more about communication than any classroom exercises could have taught them. You can tell by the students' responses whether they like a course," he continues. "Students vote with their feet — they walk out if a class is bad. But if they like what I'm doing, I end up almost going into a frenzy trying to keep on doing what they want. It's a mutually gratifying relationship."

What Nelson really wants to give his students, whether through a large lecture or small class, is a new view of communication, he confesses.

"They come out of the courses seeing communication as a very warm and feeling thing. We communicate with others only at great personal risk. The way you communicate might make or break you."

Nelson sighs and leans back in his chair. "Communication may not be our salvation, but it approaches that." □