

EXERCISE 10.3

Continued

Fourth step. The designer probably had in mind a model of university teaching centered on the lecturer, so that the students should be able to see him or her clearly. In other words, again according to the designer, the really important things take place where the lecturer stands: he or she is the center and all the rest is peripheral. But this is a theatrical or cinematographic view of teaching, where the lecturer is the leading actor (or the film at the movie theater) and the students are the passive audience.

Fifth step. Observe the conversations and verbal exchanges that take place during a lecture. Everyone can hear what the lecturer says. Indeed, he or she can sometimes use a microphone so as to be heard better. By contrast, what the students say is not easy to understand: if those seated in the front rows speak, their questions or comments can only be properly heard by the lecturer and the students sitting close to them. But those behind them can hear them indistinctly, or not at all (especially if they are sitting at the back of the room), even if the speaker raises his or her voice.

What happens? When the students in front intervene, those at the back begin talking among themselves in low voices, and their attention wanders. But it is not their fault if they cannot hear. There is a mounting buzz of voices in the room that an army of psychologists and educationists would interpret as inattention, an inability to listen, disrespect for others, discourtesy and so on. Instead, the simple explanation is that the students cannot hear. The reverse situation is when students at the back intervene: if they speak more loudly, their questions and comments can be heard by everyone. Those sitting in the last rows of seats can talk complete bilge and they will always have an audience. By contrast, those sitting in the first few rows may make the most intelligent of comments but they will only have a small audience for their brilliance. This is a law of the physics of sound, not a question of attention.

Indeed (and experiments can be done on this), the likelihood of becoming an opinion leader in the class is greater for those sitting at the back, because everyone can hear them, and their opinions can circulate. This is an example of how leadership results not only from mental aptitude but also from how the setting is constructed.

Sixth step. What idea does the designer have of the students? How does he or she think a good student should behave? They should be passive! Pay attention, follow what the lecturer says, diligently take notes, perhaps even record the lecture. It is inconceivable to the designer that a student might have something important to say (because only the lecturer can produce important thoughts). And in fact communication among students is strongly discouraged by the layout of the seats: those in front must turn round to see the faces of their classmates; those behind can only see the backs of the heads of the students in front of them. Numerous resources (emotional, psychological, physical, etc.) are required to intervene

in these conditions. Sociologically, therefore, the scant participation in lessons by students is entirely explicable. The mystery has thus been solved without recourse to psychological theories about the disaffection of young people.

Seventh step. Do you want counter-evidence? Have you ever attended a lesson where there is a table at the center of the room and the students sit in a circle around it close by the lecturer, or at desks arranged in a semi-circle? Lecture rooms with this layout are usually used for master or Ph.D. courses. I have held lessons in these conditions with the *same* students who previously had been with me in a traditional lecture room. Participation (interventions, comments, critical remarks, bickering among students) was very much higher. And yet these were the same students as before. Why had they previously been disaffected and inattentive and then had suddenly become interested? Because the furnishings, physical-spatial distances, the fact that the students could look each other in the face, could see the face of the person speaking, and so on, encouraged verbal production.

Eighth step. It is often argued that the traditional layout is the best way to accommodate a large number of people in a lecture room. But the objection is not valid. Have you ever seen the debating chambers of the European Parliament in Strasbourg or of the US Congress. If not, go to these web pages:

- http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immagine:Parlamento_europeo_plenaria.jpg; and
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Congress.

These are huge semicircular rooms containing hundreds of Europarliamentarians and Congressmen and women. Yet when a member speaks, wherever they happen to be in the chamber, everyone else can hear them. How come? Because they have a microphone! The designers of these rooms believed that every representative had the right to be heard or had interesting things to say, without this gainsaying the fact that the protagonists were still the president and his or her commissioners or secretaries. But this does not apply to students: sorry, no microphone.

Ninth step. But the oddest thing of all is that this conception of the teaching process among designers is at least 500 years old. New lecture rooms are designed with innovative materials, ergonomic seats and benches, yet the conception of the teaching process has not changed since the universities of the Renaissance.

Tenth step. Unfortunately, this conception of the teaching process has become globalized. I could show you dozens of photographs of lecture rooms that I have taken at universities in the USA, Canada, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Finland, Italy, Poland and other countries besides. I could ask you in which country the lecture rooms were situated, and you would be unable to say: they all look the same. And the same pedagogical model has been adopted for the conference rooms of hotels. In short, things will never change.