The awkward silence

Dr Lesley Chung has worked as an Economics lecturer at The University of Broadlands for the past 10 years. She went part-time for 18 months three years ago after starting a family, but recently returned to a full-time position at the university. Lesley was previously employed at a neighbouring university as a research assistant where she completed her doctorate in environmental economics. Subsequently, although she has sustained a keen interest in social and environmental analysis within economics, she has found it increasingly difficult to keep up her research and publications. The demands of teaching and administration, coupled with responsibilities as the primary carer for her young son, have made it difficult for her to find the time to publish, although
the Head of Economics sees research as 'the department's number one priority'. Her work mainly consists of teaching Economics to first-year undergraduates.

Lesley's teaching commitments include a number of regular weekly seminars in first-year Economics to groups of between 15 and 20 students and tutorials to individual students. She also teaches her own specialist module in Environmental Economics to second-year students, depending on demand. Seminars are used within the department to follow up on lectures, with an emphasis on student-led analysis and discussion. Thinking back over what happened during today's seminar, Lesley does not feel entirely happy. Two incidents occurred which are now worrying her.

The first incident happened close to the start of the seminar session. The students had seemed to be in good humour, perhaps because the end of term was drawing near. As usual, she had spent the first 10 minutes or so of the seminar recapping on some of the key concepts discussed the previous week. Lesley found this a useful way of checking that the students had done sufficient reading and worked through exercises in the course text following the lecture. It was also a two-way process where students could ask Lesley to clarify concepts they were unclear about. There was a light-hearted atmosphere at the start of the seminar and it became clear to Lesley that not enough work had been done in preparation for today's class. After a series of unsatisfactory answers to questions, one student made a particularly inept response at which point Lesley said, sarcastically, 'Clearly you've left your brain at home today! Can anyone else provide a meaningful answer to the question?' There was a ripple of laughter followed by an awkward silence. After a few seconds one of the brighter students in the seminar answered the question in a satisfactory way and the discussion moved on.

Lecturers frequently complain that students fail to participate enough in class activities and discussion. 'I asked a question in the lecture and not one of them put up their hand!' is an all too common cry of exasperation. This can partly be attributable to a lack of active learning techniques. Students, for example, can be given the opportunity to ask or answer questions in small groups before being exposed to individual questioning. Instead, all too often, students are asked to take a personal risk in front of a large peer group. Here, it is important to recognize that speaking in class is, crucially, a matter of psychological safety. From a student perspective, in other words, is it worth the risk? Making an oral contribution that is either incorrect, or simply poorly...
received by the tutor, can expose a student to embarrassment or, at worst, a sense of utter humiliation. A potentially even more damaging consequence might be loss of the good opinion of peers. Perversely, this can result from appearing to be ‘too clever’, as well as simply getting the answer wrong, given the existence of social pressures on both male and female students.

It is very easy inadvertently to crush the fragile confidence of a student of any age through a casual aside or failure to act on a crucial occasion, such as the one faced by Lesley Chung. Moreover, to criticize the student’s thinking in such a dismissive manner is a hurtful thing to do and threatens his or her ego (de Bono, 1976). Without creating an atmosphere of trust where the lecturer can be relied on to protect the individual student, it is very unlikely that any class will develop into the kind of learning environment where the full possibilities of intellectual criticism and debate can take place. Tolerance and mutual respect are important ingredients for any educational experience based on democratic principles (Freire, 1997).

Hence, teaching, like many other activities, is about developing a relationship with other people, often over a relatively short but intensive period.

Almost all my respondents were critical of Lesley for making the off-the-cuff remark that ‘clearly you’ve left your brain at home today’ and referred to the importance of building a trusting relationship with the class. Many also felt that her remark represented an abuse of power. While Lesley may be rightly disappointed by the level of student preparation, personalizing her comments in this way is likely to damage a relationship where trust is central. If she had wanted to express her sense of disappointment, she could have avoided personal criticism and the use of sarcasm by chastising the group’s performance as a whole. Assuming that Lesley hopes to promote the continued active involvement of her students, she needs to consider the likely effect of making such a personal remark. This effect, according to some respondents, might well be to put a permanent end to the willing and active engagement of this student in class. Moreover, the ‘ripple effect’ of this putdown creates a sense of fear that could potentially end the future participation of several other students in the group.

Several respondents pointed out that students take a great personal risk when making an oral contribution. Even if they know the answer to a question they may prefer to stay silent. For students, the approval of their peer group may be more important than that of the teacher. By
getting a question wrong, let alone being chastised, they might perceive that they are losing a lot more than the good opinion of the lecturer. It is easy enough to bruise the confidence of a learner without trying, let alone crushing the ego of a student in such a deliberate and public manner. Using sarcasm and putdowns is a violation of what is sometimes termed ‘interactional fairness’ (Rodabaugh, 1996).

There was common agreement that Lesley should make an apology to the student, in a public way in front of the class. Although Lesley may perceive this initially as a loss of face, it is vital if she is to re-establish trust with the group. Here, the notion of respect for learners was cited as a key underlying principle. According to this view, Lesley cannot hope to create a classroom environment based on mutual respect if she is incapable of modelling this attitude herself. While apologizing in private at the end of the class might undo some of the damage, it was generally agreed that being prepared to retract the remark in front of the other students would be the most appropriate and effective way forward.

It is easy, though, to be critical of Lesley’s action in this case. Which teacher can honestly claim never to have made a remark in class they regret at some stage of their career? A small number of my respondents pointed out that Lesley’s sharp putdown was prompted by a proper and sincere concern that the students were paying insufficient attention to their work. Although her remark was inappropriate, it was prompted by understandable emotions. Lesley has taken the failure of her students to prepare adequately as a personal affront and her outburst was prompted by her commitment as a teacher to get learners to take their reciprocal responsibilities seriously. It is important, respondents commented, for lecturers to be demanding in this way without allowing this exacting attitude to get out of control, as in this instance.