

If your job depends on your ability to speak up, here's news of a voice workshop in London where, among other curious aids to speaking, you learn to think of your armpits as loudspeakers. Report by Denise Winn. Illustration by Andrew Lovell

HEALTH

Victoria is reading aloud a child's story while balancing a plant pot on her head. Margaret is clambering over a climbing frame singing a poem. Colin is trying to give a presentation while throwing a bean bag at members of the audience, who catch and return it.

All are teachers learning for the first time, in a very novel way, how to use their voices correctly. They are at special teachers' workshop in London run by voice teacher Angela Caine and are prepared to pay £30 for the day's training. Many others who might benefit can't afford to. Angela has found more and more teachers developing serious problems with their voices and her aim now is to make school managers aware of the gap she is filling and include voice work in in-service training.

She recently ran a workshop in Warwickshire for 60 teachers where she found that four had already had operations for nodules on the vocal cords caused by strain, and four more were heading that way. Two told her that if they couldn't do something to help their voices they would have to take early retirement. Recently a speech therapist at a Norwich hospital has contacted her, also - concerned at being referred an increasing number of teachers with voice problems.

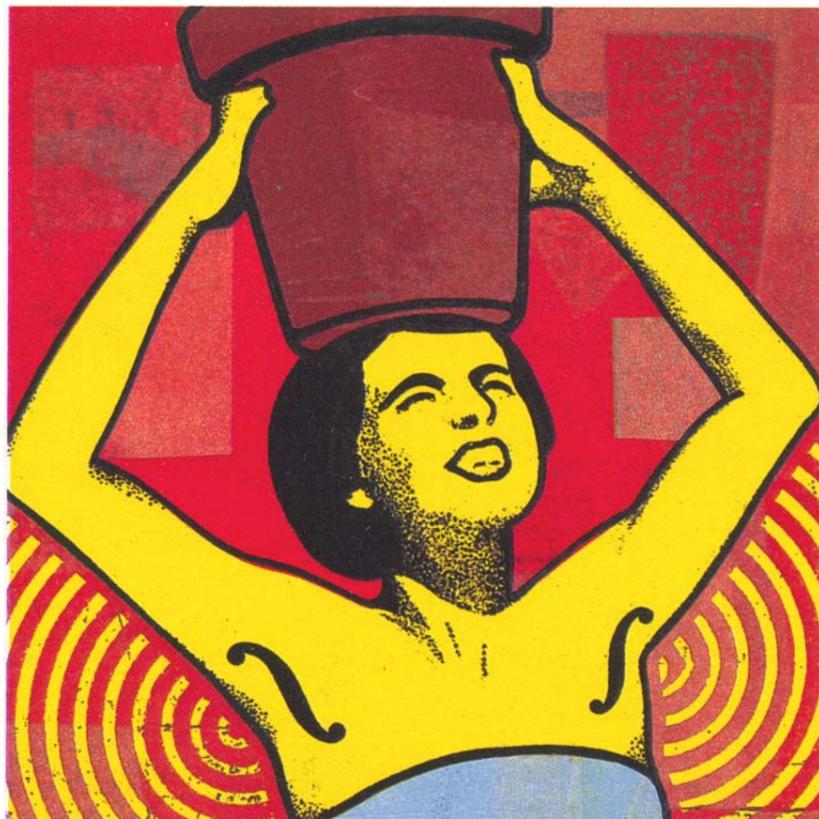
"Teaching is particularly stressful now, with more discipline problems and a loss of professional status and image," says Angela. "When you're sure of yourself, the voice is more mechanically sound. If you lose confidence, problems creep in."

At the workshop in London, Pauline, a primary school teacher, says she wants to be able to use her voice without shouting. "Little children are noisy, but if I have to shout to be heard, the children don't like it and I end up physically exhausted."

One secondary school teacher says that she is so vocally tired towards the end of the day that her voice lacks all expression, another says she can't project without sounding high and squeaky.

To Angela this is all familiar stuff. She was a professional singer and a music teacher for several years: "I could fill the Albert Hall when I sang, but in class I lost my voice every week. I know now that I wasn't using my body correctly. I thought that the vocal equipment worked separately from the rest of the body."

In fact, it appears the larynx is very dependent on the rest of the body if it is to function efficiently. Angela explains: "It's on a spring mechanism and, just as a car's suspension needs to be free to absorb the shock of bumpy roads, so the spring system



SPEAK OUT

of the larynx must be free to keep the voice smooth whatever you're doing.

"Forget the word projection. It's nonsense to talk about 'throwing' the voice to the back of a room, because your voice is in the larynx and your whole body is your sound box."

The armpits, she says, are our loudspeakers, so what we do with our arms is very important to the voice. Arms folded across the chest block the voice - as does clutching piles of books and papers to the chest. The pelvic floor forms the bottom of the breathing system and needs to be free for breathing to be relaxed: a tight pelvic floor means a strained voice.

Angela's workshop in London is equipped with bouncing balls, balance boards, mini-trampolines and a climbing frame - all important aids in freeing the voice. And the teachers discover, to their amazement, that loosening-up has a dramatic effect. Lying across a large ball and bouncing gently up and down while reading aloud from a book may seem undignified, yet it actually adds authority to the voice because it is given spring. Standing talking with one's face an inch from the wall, arms raised away from the all-important armpits, makes the back resonate and sound carry without shouting.

Bobbing up and down the climbing frame while reciting, throwing and catching a bean bag, having a conversation and holding, with elbows out, a heavy plant pot

on the head, all emphasise spring, stretch and balance, the three vital ingredients for a powerful voice, says Angela. Once experienced, it also becomes possible to stand still instead of stiff.

But there is more. "If you want to get flexibility and colour into your speaking voice you need to sing every day, or your dynamic range gets smaller and smaller. Sing anything, in the morning in the shower, at the sink or in the car. It will actually affect how, mechanically, your voice behaves that day."

She asks a French teacher, Nicky, to sing a nursery rhyme. Nicky starts by taking a breath. "Don't take a breath!" cries Angela. "Your ribs are pre-loaded so that the moment you stop breathing out you automatically breathe in. If you take a special breath before speaking or singing, you put pressure on the vocal cords and push the voice up thin and high."

She gets everyone to read from a children's storybook but to sing the verbs. Almost all the voices go up when warbling 'was' or 'went'. "The singing voice isn't naturally higher than the speaking voice," says Angela. "But if you always sing higher than you speak, your voice automatically gets higher whenever you want to put emphasis on something ('Don't run in the corridor'), because you haven't any low notes at your disposal."

Pauline is impressed. "We were told at college that because young children's voices are high we should lower our voices to get their attention, but I found it impossible. Now I realise why."

A useful technique for starting to lower the voice is to squat down quickly, knees pointing outwards, bang the floor and then rise and start to sing or speak at once. Pitch is instantly lowered because the pelvic floor is freed. Another tip is to smile maniacally or, better still, push the skin at the corners of the mouth up towards the cheekbones while reciting or singing (try it in private). This frees the jaw, causing the pitch to drop and the voice to richen.

"The value of working on the voice goes far beyond the classroom, however: anyone regularly uses their voice in their job can benefit. Angela has taught managers, office staff, lecturers, actors and housewives, all of whom wanted to develop more confidence or authority when speaking.

Diane, who works in customer relations for a large company, feels far more effective in her job since taking a class with Angela. "Whenever I got an angry caller on the phone making a complaint, I very soon found my voice getting high, hurried and irritated. It was as if I couldn't help copying the caller," she said. "Now my voice is no longer a disembodied thing. I keep my feet firmly on the floor, focus my eyes, and my voice is firm and unflustered. The effect I've found is that the caller starts calming down and copying me!"

For details of Angela Caine's Voice Workshops phone 071-703 1575.

10 TIPS FOR SPEAKING ALOUD

- 1 Before you start, stop trying to remember your words.
- 2 Don't stand straightening your tie or smoothing your skirt.
- 3 Don't bother to clear your throat. The need is just nervousness which will pass as soon as you start speaking.
- 4 Stand easily on two feet.
- 5 Don't lock your knees back.
- 6 Imagine holding a heavy plant pot on

your head. This will send your head up, heels down and shoulders out.

7 Look at the audience. If the eyes don't focus, the voice doesn't focus.

8 Ask yourself questions about the audience. Are they hot, cold, comfortable, expectant? All this will help you to focus.

9 Listen to the sounds in the room and wait for the right moment to begin.

10 No big breath before you speak.