

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF DESIGNING EFFECTIVE PRESENTATIONS

Despite an increased effort over the past decade at secondary school to integrate presentation skills into the curriculum, many if not most university students still have not acquired much presentation experience, particularly in English. As virtual novices they are quite anxious about their performance. Fearing that any little mistake could result in catastrophe, many presenters become fixated on the complete reproduction of their memorized script before anything should slip their mind. Their apparent measure of success is the flawless reproduction of this text in English.

What is missing in the students' calculation is the audience itself. A presentation is not primarily the delivery of a script, rather an act of communication with the intent to convey one's messages to the audience. Therefore, the presenter needs to design and deliver his presentation in such a manner that the audience easily recognizes these messages. To do this successfully the presenter has to understand that he cannot allow himself to be driven by his own anxieties and unrealistic self-expectations because they distract him from focusing on the needs and expectations of his audience. He must be aware of the interplay of his own mindset and that of the audience's in order to design, practice and deliver the presentation effectively.

I. The Presenter's Expectations of His Own Performance

A major source of a novice presenter's anxieties is stage fright; and when the presentation is to be given in English these anxieties become magnified by the presenter's lack of confidence in his own English skills. Frustrated by his restricted expression when trying to speak spontaneously in the foreign language when under pressure, the novice presenter often feels compelled to memorize a prepared script. The fact that the presentation has to be delivered in English easily becomes the scapegoat for all of his perceived presentation shortcomings. He laments that if he could only give the presentation in his native language, he would have no problems with presentation delivery. Clearly this simplistic perception of the situation masks other shortcomings and anxieties the presenter overlooks.

Potentially the most debilitating anxiety that a novice presenter experiences comes from exaggerated expectations of one's own performance. At least in Germany it seems that a great many students have become victims of a mindset bent on *perfectionism*. They think that their presentation has to be perfect in delivery as if their life depended on it. This exaggerated expectation leaves no room for mispronunciations, awkward or incorrect formulations, slips of the tongue, lapses in memory or even complete mental blocks. The pressure the presenter thus places upon himself is quite unbearable. By unrealistically assuming that an activity as complex as a presentation can be performed flawlessly, the presenter places himself in a no-win situation: He psychologically perceives his performance as a failure regardless how effective the presentation may in fact be from the perspective of the audience.

It is not just a question of how debilitating anxieties arising from a mindset of perfectionism can be for the presenter; more adversely they distract the presenter from the work at hand: Conveying his messages as effectively as possible to the audience. How can students overcome this debilitating mindset? Aside from employing stress-relief techniques¹, students have to set much more realistic expectations for themselves.

This requires a paradigm change from a mindset of perfectionism to one that can be called *professionalism*. To begin with, a professional does not place himself under undue pressure: If the audience does not expect perfection of the presenter, why should he? Moreover, he does not preoccupy himself with self-judgment (primarily focusing on one's performance instead of on serving the audience): Judgment is the business of the audience. In addition, he recognizes from his own experience as an audience member that flaws in presentation delivery do not *automatically* lead to a loss of face in the audience's estimation of the presenter; on the contrary, when problems are handled adeptly, a presenter earns respect for his professionalism. Consequently, the presenter prepares and practices his presentation a number of times to reduce the potential for mistakes and achieve the best possible result under the given circumstances. Moreover, he recognizes that regardless how well he has prepared, in the final presentation some things will still go awry. Therefore, he also *practices* fixing mistakes as they arise in trial runs of an ongoing presentation. The focus of the presenter has shifted away from recapitulating a memorized text (the perfectionist's typical approach to presentations) to effectively serving the audience's needs in helping them to grasp the presentation messages.

In adopting this new mindset, the novice presenter requires a lot of coaching and emotional support from an instructor who not only supports him with advice and constructive feedback but also encourages him to believe in his own abilities to give the presentation well. Moreover, it is optimal to have students work supportively together in teams in and outside the classroom even for individual presentations. Students should learn to trust their own observations as audience members. As the presenter is inclined to be oblivious to making mistakes while giving the presentation, his fellow students can help him identify his strengths and shortcomings. Moreover, the fellow students benefit from this coaching experience for their own presentation.

II. The Audience's Expectations of the Presenter

The audience expects that the presenter will genuinely attempt to communicate with them. They also would like to sense an aura of professionalism through the manner the presenter conducts himself in serving their needs well.

At the start of a presentation the audience affords the presenter a brief window of opportunity to "connect" with them. If the audience senses that the presenter is not really talking *to* them, rather *at* them by reading off a script from notes or a laptop, or by reciting a memorized script, they instinctively realize that the presentation is not a live act of communication, rather a canned performance.

There are numerous tell-tale signs when the novice presenter recites script from memory: While searching for text in his head, he generally looks anywhere but at the audience. Moreover, being more preoccupied with the fear of forgetting what comes next than with actually communicating what is presently being expressed to the audience, the novice presenter not only hardly ever brings sentences to a close with a falling intonation pattern, he also fails to emotively interpret what he is actually saying at the moment: His voice remains invariably flat without emotive interpretation. This unnatural form of communication is difficult for the audience to follow because it frustrates the audience in their effort to comprehend what is said.

In lieu of a script-based presentation the professional presenter practices speaking freely based on bulleted key-word phrases he has placed on the transparencies. Instead of memorizing a script of say 800 words, he works with say a mere 40 ideas/messages that are prompted by the key-word phrases. The presenter is

thereby relieved of the tremendous burden of memorizing an entire script as well as the anxiety of experiencing embarrassing lapses of memory when trying to recite it. Rather he is able to concentrate on delivering the messages indicated by each key-word phrase at the time they appear in the course of the presentation. Through the prompting by one's transparencies, he can concentrate completely on one item at time without fear of forgetting something yet to come. Through this approach most presenters can learn to speak freely and focus on communicating their messages with good eye contact, supportive gestures, naturally falling intonation patterns and emotive interpretation throughout the presentation.²

Another indicator that a novice presenter is reciting text instead of genuinely communicating messages is the hectic pace at which he speaks as well as his failure to employ pausing effectively. For fear of forgetting the rest of his script the presenter anxiously spews out memorized passages as fast as he can produce them. Speaking at breakneck pace not only makes it difficult for the audience to follow, but it places excessive pressure on the presenter himself, and thereby evokes frequent mistakes.

The presenter needs to pace himself, by usually speaking at 80% of normal tempo (allowing enough time for the audience to follow the presentation easily and for the presenter to find the expressions he needs to formulate his ideas freely). However, there are also passages to be spoken slowly with enunciation to indicate their significance – e.g. when leading up to and presenting one's name, the title of the presentation, transitions, key passages of the summary as well as when making transitions between transparencies and body sections. Moreover, providing pauses between passages of information when presenting information related to one transparency allows the audience to digest this information before moving on to the next passage. Without strategic employment of pauses, the presentation becomes an incomprehensible blur. Long pauses of say five seconds can also build up dramatic expectation in the audience regarding the information to follow. This can be employed effectively before starting each new transparency but particularly as a means of preparing the audience for the delivery of the messages of the summary.

The window of opportunity for establishing a relationship of communication with the audience is brief. If by the end of the introduction the presenter has not convinced the audience that he is genuinely communicating to them in an effective manner, the audience members lose interest, glancing surreptitiously at their watches while speculating when the presentation will be over.

The audience not only wants the presenter to quickly open channels of communication with them, they also want the presenter in their estimation to gain credibility as a professional. How can the presenter hope to earn the respect of the audience and thereby be able to influence them with his messages when he himself exercises little control over his own eyes, voice and speaking tempo? He has to demonstrate expertise in these regards in order to make the presentation as audience-friendly as possible. He needs to radiate an air of composure and sovereignty in his delivery but also in dealing effectively with the problems that arise.

III. Pre-presentation Advice

Know your audience: Anticipate the demographics of your audience: their age and cultural/educational/professional background? What can you assume they know already about your topic and, beyond this, what they would like to know more. This information should help you be able to prepare the development and delivery of your messages. It will also help you anticipate likely questions. In particular this information should help you dispel exaggerated expectations and anxieties.

Attitude: Think positively.

- Know that your presentation can never be perfect...and fortunately it does not have to be...to be very successful. Rather focus on communicating your messages effectively: When some things go wrong (and they will), remain cool knowing you can manage your way through any problems that may arise.

- Do not judge yourself or your performance; rather stay focused on conveying your messages to the audience.

Control your nerves: Before starting look at the audience with a hearty smile and wait briefly for their attention to raise suspense and demonstrate your composure.

- Pace yourself while speaking – (Slow down!) There is no reason for hectic. Display sovereignty. Not only can the audience follow you better, you will gain their respect by serving their listening needs well.

- Take brief breaks between each of the information passages of a presentation. This helps the audience follow the presentation better and gives you the opportunity to collect your thoughts for the next passage.

- Use every reasonable opportunity to stretch out the introduction to have enough time to build a relationship with the audience and establish your credentials as an effective presenter before starting the body of a presentation.

Eye and voice control: Stay focused on communicating to your audience.

- Look at the audience! Do not look out of the window, at the floor/ceiling, the projection wall or the computer monitor except when clicking to the next page.

- Get your voice to come down at the end of sentences (otherwise it sounds like a memorized script).

- Get your emotions involved – Interpret what you are saying. Moreover, your voice has to reflect your appreciation for this speaking opportunity as well as your interest in the topic (instead of your nervousness). Why should the audience become interested if you do not seem to be yourself?

Prepare transparencies:

- Use visuals instead of text whenever possible. People remember them better.

- Keep text to a minimum, mainly a few key-word phrases on each transparency that can be read by the audience within five seconds. By and large, rather than provide facts, details and messages, transparencies should evoke curiosity by naming topics: Remember that you, not the transparencies, should be the primary source of new information.

- Numbering of section headings on most transparencies provide the audience orientation. Capitalization, font size and indentation distinguish levels of importance: 1) for headings/subheadings the first letter of the first word and all nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives are capitalized to indicate the most important information, 2) for main points only the first letter of the first word of a bulleted line is capitalized, 3) for minor points (introduced with indented bulleting) there is no capitalization to indicate the least important information.

Prepare handouts: There are two basic types.

- Provided at the beginning of the presentation the first type is a list of bulleted key-word topics on one page. It pre-structures the presentation and provides space between the items for taking notes. As it takes just seconds to browse through it, this handout does not distract the audience from

following the presentation. However, passing it out at the end would be senseless because it is not self-explanatory.

- Passed out at the end of the presentation, the second type of handout has to be self-explanatory written in detail with full sentences. If it were provided during the presentation, it would distract the audience from following the presentation. Moreover, noise is generated by the frequent turning of pages.

Practice transitions to the next transparency: Announce, click and wait!

- Transition sentences are spoken slowly (50% tempo) with a long pause before the initial sentence. This provides the audience a clear indication that a transition is occurring and gives you the opportunity to shift tempo.
- Announce a page before clicking to it, otherwise you will only echo what the audience has already just read. If you click in the middle of announcing the next page, the audience no longer follows what you are saying opting first to check out the new page. While announcing the next page, do not stand at the laptop with outstretched arm hanging over it like the Sword of Damocles prepared to click immediately. Make no move to the laptop until the announcement has been completed. When the announcement is completed, briefly pause before making your move to click. Do not talk immediately after clicking to a new page: The audience feels annoyed by your talking because they first wish to view/read what the new page presents.
- Once you have clicked, wait about five seconds before speaking. This allows the audience to check out the new transparency and it builds up suspense. You have earned a break.
- Use this pause to make your first sentence(s) of every new page dynamic. At least at these moments be sure to generate interest in what you are presenting.

Final Note to Novice Presenters

The task of giving presentations effectively may seem quite daunting, especially when done without notes. It is advisable to concentrate in particular on three aspects of the presentation to ensure the greatest likelihood for success: The introduction, the transitions and the conclusion. Although these passages last only a few minutes all together, they are crucial for establishing a relationship with the audience, establishing and maintaining a persona of professionalism, and enhancing effectiveness in conveying your messages to the audience. Moreover, these basic structural elements of the presentation when mastered well will serve you well in any presentation.

What had seemed daunting now perhaps appears to be much more achievable because the crux boils down to these three phases of the presentation. Undoubtedly, the body of the presentation is very important for developing your messages; however, if these messages are not packaged and delivered in an engaging manner, nobody will pay any heed to them.

Basic Tips to Instructors on the Management of Presentation Courses

- When you introduce the course outline mapping out the sojourn students will undertake with you, many students will not believe that they could ever speak freely without notes. Assure them that you at least do believe in their success and you will support them throughout the process.
- Provide continual encouragement by imbuing your faith in them that they will indeed become effective presenters in the course of the training. If students sense that you really care about their career development, they will go that extra mile with you by making a concerted effort.

- Show enthusiasm for their success in overcoming their challenges. Give them high-fives!
- Encourage students to coach each other by preparing in groups that provide feedback, tips and encouragement to one another.
- Practice introductions and mini presentations frequently in small groups to focus on making extensive eye contact, turning up the volume, bringing the voice down at the end of sentences, emotively interpreting what is expressed as well as pausing and pacing.
- Conduct practice presentations to provide feedback weeks in advance of the final presentation. Students cannot possibly reach their potential in one go. Practice presentations allow students to work out the bugs to achieve much better results. The clear improvement in their final-presentation performance does wonders for their confidence. Without practice presentations a great number of students would otherwise complete the course in disappointment of their performance losing confidence in their abilities – a result diametrical to your aims.

¹ Stress-relief techniques can be effectively employed to help bring anxiety levels down to manageable levels. To burn off adrenalin, relieve tension and relax, one can stretch one's limbs and back muscles as well as massage one's face, scalp, hands and back of the neck. One can also take deep breaths that are then slowly exhaled thereby releasing one's nervousness. Finally, one can conjure up positive images in one's mind like warm sunshine, the taste of hot chocolate, or inspiring songs in order to support the desired conviction "I can do this well." Note: Anxiety is an ally as it motivates you to prepare presentations well in advance instead of last minute.

² The aim of this concept is to ensure that all students gain a viable alternative to conventional approaches of employing notes and memorizing script. Through a technique I call "double vision," students can train themselves to look at the audience while speaking with a strong voice, emotively, with a falling intonation pattern and most importantly at a tempo that is easy for the audience to follow, employing effective pausing. The trick is in practice (not in the presentation itself – by then speaking in an effective manner should have become students' *modus operandi*) not only to think about what they are saying but also at the same time pay attention to the manner in which they are speaking and thereby catch themselves in the act of employing their eyes and voice incorrectly. This way they can quickly train themselves to behave in the desired manner even under stressful circumstances. Once proper presentation habits have been established, the students are then free to focus on what they are saying.

Admittedly, this approach may not work for all students. Some students have severe limitations in their ability to formulate their ideas freely. In this case working out a script-based presentation may provide the only approach that works for them. These students should nevertheless focus on developing effective communication channels – eye contact, voice control and pacing.

By contrast, there always are students who are quite adept at memorizing and delivering a script with all the hallmarks of genuine communication. Though these students are very capable of communicating freely in English, they are usually overly anxious about making slips in formulation. Speaking freely provides such students an alternative approach requiring much less input for equally effective results. They should be encouraged to overcome their perfectionist fears by embracing the professional approach proposed in this paper.