Presentation skills in changing environments

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Abstract

Learning Advisors need to present well to colleagues and students when sharing research findings and teaching academic concepts. Therefore, presentation skills are core academic skills for the profession. This paper shares the key insights of the basics of developing a confident and engaging presentation style from both literature on public speaking and from my years of successful academic presentations and speech contests.

Introduction

Numerous authors link competent presentation skills to employment success, promotion, remuneration and popularity (Duarte, 2008; Leech, 2004; Price, 2012). However, competent presentation skills are also important for teaching faculty and Learning Advisors to engage students and colleagues. In addition, many studies mention benefits of better speaking skills for students (Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009; Pearson, DeWitt, Child, Kahl, & Dandamudi, 2007). Through the expansion of digital technology, presentation environments now also include online presentations to students and colleagues. However, many people have doubts about their ability to present well. Cho, Smits, and Telch (2004) measured the cognitive aspect of speech anxiety and found two main factors: prediction of poor performance and the fear of negative evaluation by audience. Confident presenting requires a clear collection of knowledge and skills. This paper outlines some key basic strategies across four stages of a presentation. Readers can develop these basic skills to improve their teaching and research presentations.

Stage 1: Preparation leading up to the presentation

Know the audience

Price (2012) argued that knowing the audience is the most important part of a presentation. She recommended knowing what matters to the audience, as their perspective and solutions that work for them is key to effective presenting. Price (2012) gives more details on how to do this. Many authors of presentation skills emphasise the importance of knowing the audience (Jay & Jay, 2000; Leech, 2004;

[1] Hammond, K. (2014). Presentation skills in changing environments. In H. Martin & M. Simkin (Eds.), *Hīkina te manuka!: Learning connections in a changing environment: Proceedings of the 2013 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 53-64). Napier, New Zealand: ATLAANZ.

Timm & Bienvenu, 2011). They include questions such as:

- What would capture the audience's attention most about the topic?
- How many people are likely to be in the audience?
- Are they experts in the field or laypeople?
- Are they the type of people who will get up and try activities?
- How tired or distracted will the audience be?

Knowing the audience enables the presenter to target the point to the interests of the audience and run the session in a way that will engage them.

Make a point

Consider what the audience needs to take away from the presentation. This could include: main findings, materials developed, skills, the desire to read the full paper, or to form a network for further discussion. Leech (2004) pointed out that presentations should not contain the level of detail as written reports as the audience cannot absorb it. Therefore, it is more effective to focus on main points which will be of relevance to the audience.

The presentation room

Knowing the room characteristics also helps with preparation. Price (2012) provides a comprehensive list of factors to consider when preparing a room before giving a presentation. These factors include:

- What is the capacity of the room?
- Can the chairs be moved or are they fixed to the floor?
- Can people move about the room easily if needed?
- How much space is there to move around (are tables or a lectern in the way)?
- Are the technological requirements present and working?

The presentation structure

After considering main points, the audience and room characteristics, the structure of the presentation becomes the focus. Several authors refer to patterns of organisation such as characteristics, chronological sequence, cause-effect, problem-solution, locations, logical development or professional standards (Leech, 2004; Timm & Bienvenu, 2011). If presenting the main points is the aim of the presentation, it can be structured to include, for example, the most important findings to entice the audience to read the entire paper later. If skills are the aim, the focus can be on activities fitting within the time allowance. This could include a brief description of why the skills are needed and how they are practised. In addition, there needs to be clear signalling to the audience about transitions between sections (Jay & Jay, 2000). Clear signalling is also important between the active and receptive times, for example, a presenter could say, "We are going to do some discussion, when I raise my hand I want you to wrap up quickly and focus back on me."

Visuals–Slides

Price (2012) argued that the presenter is the presentation, rather than the slides, as it is the person rather than the technology that connects with people. Duarte (2008) pointed out that presentation software demands that people communicate visually rather than verbally. However, she stated that few people are trained for this form of communication. She cautioned presenters that an audience will listen to the speaker or read the slides, but not both, so it is necessary to consider whether the information is best delivered in a written document or a presentation. She noted that many people present slides with too much text. Text heavy summary slides are what Reynolds (2008) coined as a "slideument". Figure 1 shows the progression from document to slideument to slide.

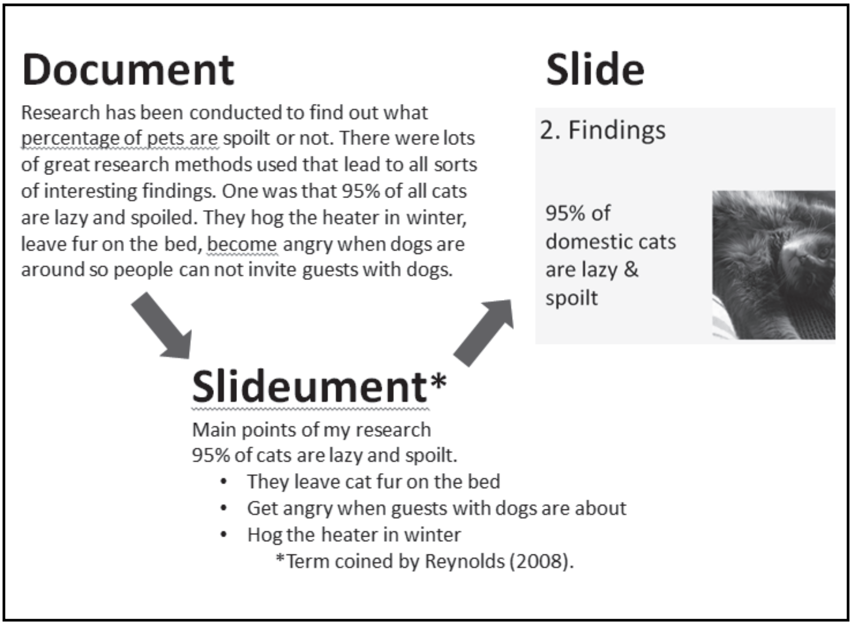

Figure 1. A document, slideument and slide

Instead of putting several points on one slide, a stronger message can be made if there are a few key items across several slides (Duarte, 2008; Price, 2012). However, in some cases it is necessary to break the "rules". Sometimes there needs to be a bit more text on slides, for example when showing a long quote. There are many authors who give useful guides for slide presentation (Jay & Jay, 2000; Price, 2012; Reynolds, 2008; Timm & Bienvenu, 2011).

Practise, practise, practise

Several authors have listed the benefits of practice, such as: coping with anxiety; gaining a positive attitude towards speaking; building confidence; assisting memory and identifying problems; thus making the delivery smoother (Leech, 2004; Smith & Frymier, 2006). Practise helps to rectify problems in advance. For example, if the mind goes blank at particular places the presenter can strengthen their memory in advance at those places. There is a continuum of using notes from constantly reading to not using notes at all. Avoiding the use of notes enables more connection with the audience. However, there are still good presentations where notes are used unobtrusively. It is helpful if presentation notes are written in larger font or picture form to be seen easily. Overall, practise is an important part of preparing a presentation as it builds confidence, memory, and smoother delivery.

Stage 2: Preparation on the day

The checklist

A checklist can be part of a ritual the presenter uses to prepare himself/herself. Pre-performance rituals such as relaxation techniques, positive self-talk and mental rehearsal have been found to help dancers by reducing anxiety and preparing them for performance (Hefferon & Ollis, 2006). Presentation rituals for academic presentations could also include these, and in addition, the presenter could make a checklist of items such as: confirmation of speaking room and time, speaking notes, document hard copies, memory stick, business cards, whiteboard marker, timing device, water and tissues. Once in the presentation room, the items can be arranged as needed. Similar to dancers, the pre- performance ritual can calm nerves, and build confidence in the performance environment.

Dealing with nerves

Bodie (2010) defines Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) as, "a situation-specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation" (p. 72). He described PSA across physiological, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. A cognitive based study identified a common list of 23 fearful thoughts people have about presenting (Cho et al., 2004). Treatment of PSA has been a topic of research and educational concern for decades (Bodie, 2010). According to Fletcher (2001), nerves are valid, and they will reduce with increased experience. Price (2012) argued that some degree of nervousness is preferable because it builds energy, enthusiasm and shows the presenter cares. Furthermore, she states that the audience would rather feel a sense of connection to a sincere and enthusiastic speaker than a perfect one. Figure 2 shows some common signs of nervousness and coping strategies which I have used when presenting.

Nervous sign	Strategy
Dry mouth	Calmly sip water from a bottle
Sweating	Wear dark clothes, have a spare top to change into afterwards
Trembling hands	Avoid picking up single sheets of paper, but if necessary, hold a clipboard or other hard surface behind it to mask the quiver
Stuttering	Speak more slowly, repeat the word calmly
Scared of audience's eyes watching	Take spectacles off so faces are not so clear, or look at the tops of people's heads (aim to eventually see their eyes though)
Blank mind	Have notes or objects visible to jog the memory
Speaking too quickly	Slow down, pause between sections, use 100-130 words per minute of presentation time

Figure 2. Signs of nervousness and how to overcome them

Even if the presenter feels nervous the audience will not notice if the speaker appears calm. In fact, a slight pause can give the audience more time to reflect and they might not even notice the pause. Fletcher (2001) commented that presenters appear more confident than they feel.

Starting the session: The start before the start

The audience is already watching the speaker before the presentation begins. Leech (2004) noted the speaker's non-verbal signals influence audience receptiveness to the speaker's message. As mentioned by Hefferon and Ollis (2006), the preparation ritual can serve as a way of channelling focus prior to the formal start of a performance. Part of preparation can be arriving early to the room or sitting in on the previous presentation to get the "feel" of the room. Once the presenter is familiar with the room they can set up items to ensure everything is within easy reach. Once items are set up, the presenter can break the ice by greeting the audience as they settle in. The greeting can include distributing the presentation handout or asking people about their interest in the session or where they have travelled from.

Starting the presentation

Start timing from the official session start time. Even if the presentation is delayed, the timer counts to when the session is allocated to finish. Therefore, an important aspect of preparation is to consider what material could be shortened or dropped in the event of a late start. Time planning should include the initial formal introduction. If someone other than the presenter is timing, it is important to communicate clearly to the timer about how they introduce the session and how time warnings are signalled. Useful introductions can include brief information about the speaker and topic and a reminder to turn off sound making devices. Overviews are useful ways to engage the audience and they can follow a number of formats. Figure 3 shows an example opening structure recommended by Price (2012):

Section	Components
Introduction	Introduction / welcome (by presenter or chairperson) Establish speaker credentials Purpose of presentation Benefit to audience
Attention getter	Statistic Story News Provocative question (see Price, 2012, for longer list)
Executive preview	Logistics: finishing time, when Q&A is appropriate, slide or handout availability afterwards Transition to body of the presentation

Figure 3. Components of a strong presentation opening

Price (2012) emphasised using what is of value to the audience as a way to persuade them. Therefore, an effective way to get attention early is to let the audience know how the topic relates to them. This can be done by saying, "This presentation will give you (something you value)" rather than saying, "I would like to talk about . . .." The first example focuses on what the audience wants; the latter focuses on what the presenter wants.

Handouts can be helpful for notes and exercises or a barrier if the audience starts reading them instead of listening to the presenter. Therefore, informing the audience of what the handout is and when to use it can be helpful. For example, the presenter could say, "The handout will be used for the exercise later in the presentation, please do not read it now. I will tell you when to refer to it." Starting a presentation with a clear overview is a way to build confidence in both the audience and the presenter.

Stage 3: During the session

Engaging voice

An engaging voice can be achieved by using a conversational tone (Duarte, 2010; Price, 2012) and using the lower range of one's natural conversational range as lower voices are perceived as more credible and authoritative than higher pitched voices (Price, 2012). Price also recommended considering the emotion associated with the information, such as surprise at a statistic or urgency in a call to action. Figure 4 shows seven qualities of a good speaking voice as described by Price:

<table>
<tr><th>Quality</th><th>Expresses</th><th>Skills</th></tr>
<tr><td>Tone</td><td rowspan="7">Credibility
Sincerity
Inspiration
Emotion
Attitude
Energy
Impact</td><td>Imagine talking to audience like one to one
Friendly, conversational tone
Record own voice to get feedback</td></tr>
<tr><td>Pitch</td><td>Use high and low notes of vocal range</td></tr>
<tr><td>Pace</td><td>Speak between 150-160 words / min
Slow speech 20-30% for more difficult material
Mark material to remind of the correct pace</td></tr>
<tr><td>Volume</td><td>Breathe deeply
Use a microphone if possible
Speak towards the audience</td></tr>
<tr><td>Inflection</td><td>Vary tone, pace and pitch to avoid monotone
Mark material to show special emphasis points</td></tr>
<tr><td>Articulation</td><td>Clearly pronounce all syllables
Pronounce words correctly</td></tr>
<tr><td>No fillers</td><td>Pause instead of saying “um”</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 4. Seven good speaking voice qualities

Body language

Messages are received not only from what is said but how it is said. Figure 5 presents five aspects of body language in presentations described by Price (2012):

Component	Communicates	Strategies
Eye contact	Sincerity Confidence Connection	Looking at each person to build a relationship Hold the contact for 2-3 seconds & move on Notice audience non-verbal reactions
Facial expression	Emotion Attitude	Smile Emphasise facial expression to express a point
Gestures	Memory help Understanding Participation Confidence Balance	Use motion to illustrate message & emotion Show size, quantity, weight with hands Show audience what they have to do Use natural and purposeful gestures When not gesturing, have a neutral poised stance
Posture	Leadership Authority Energy Attitude	Pull in the stomach Balance weight evenly on both feet Keep the head and chin up Hands by sides (when not gesturing)

Component	Communicates	Strategies
Movement	Naturalness Impact Connection Highlight	Start in the front and centre of the presentation area Be in full view of the audience as much as possible Use a mobile microphone to allow movement Walk to a different spot to show a transition Step forward to emphasise a point Use both sides of the room and back and centre Walk into the audience to connect or recruit Move for a reason rather than to expel nerves

Figure 5. Five components of effective body language

Authors often refer to these concepts in Figure 5; however, it is important that the presenter develops their own path to improving these skills. Some of these are relatively easy to acquire, such as a neutral stance or a smile, while others can take many years of practise to become competent. I found maintaining eye contact and being able to note the non-verbal reactions of the audience took longer to acquire. The important point is to make incremental improvements on the chosen skills with each presentation.

Using slides

Duarte (2008) described five principles of good slide design. Firstly, slides should be honest. She advised that data should be simply and honestly presented rather than adorned with fancy artistic features. Secondly, slides should make the point and show what the results mean rather than just present data. Thirdly, the right tool should be used. For example, visual descriptions can make the point more clearly than a chart. Fourthly, slides should emphasise the importance by keeping contextual information in the background and highlighting the important data and message in the foreground. Finally, slides should be simple.

Authors also offer guidelines on how many slides per minute (Price, 2012). However, a point can be made by flicking through several slides rapidly or another slide may be the basis of five minutes of presentation. Therefore, it may be more helpful to consider how many slides are needed to illustrate the point rather than the number needed per minute.

Managing time

Managing time is an important benchmark of a good presentation. Leech (2004) described poor time management as a “common failing” (p. 62). Timing devices in mobile phones and other devices can be incorporated into practise sessions with the screen saver set to longer than the presentation, otherwise the screen will go black. Timing each section of the presentation is important so adjustments can be made if the presentation is ahead or behind. Timing can be managed with a timing sheet listing the main sections and how many minutes for each. Figure 6 shows an example of how I have started off a timing sheet.

Topic	Materials & activities	Start time
Introduction & overview	Overview slide	0:00
Background to problem	Photos on slide	3:00
Does the audience have this problem?	Quiz sheet 5 minute quiz take & score	10:00

Figure 6. Example of a topic and time sheet

Questions and answers section

It is helpful for the audience to be clear about when the question and answers section starts. Jay and Jay (2000) pointed out that introductory and summarising sentences are verbal signposts indicating key stages in the presentation. A clear introductory sentence into the question and answer section signals the transition to more active participation. Transitioning smoothly to the question and answer section can be achieved by saying something like, “That concludes the presentation of the research. I will now open the session to any questions you might have.”

If there are no questions, it is helpful to have a couple prepared and introduce them by saying, “A question I have been asked is . . .” and then answering that question briefly before asking the audience again if they have questions. It is a useful skill to be able to be comfortable (or at least portray it) and welcoming during silent times in the question and answer section. This is important to allow people to consider their questions and have time to ask them. If the presenter fills this space with more talk of their research, it can prevent audience questions. Likewise, Price (2012) cautioned that when questions are asked, the answers should be in relation to the question only and not develop into a new elongated presentation. There may be several other people wanting to ask questions and question and answer times in conferences are usually short.

In my experience I have often heard people express fear at being asked a question they cannot answer. When faced with a question that cannot be answered at that time it is appropriate to say, “My research did not focus on that” or “I’m not sure of the answer to that but I can look into it and get back to you” or “Is there anyone in the audience who could offer an answer to that?” Sometimes a question is asked that is outside the scope of the research; the answer can be found later or an expert in the audience can provide knowledge or experience for discussion.

Stage 4: Ending the session

Finishing on time
It is a professional courtesy and practical issue to finish on time. Many people need to be at other places after the presentation: the next session (which may be in another building), their own presentation, a refreshment break, or travelling. It is important to people to be at these places. Refreshment breaks may seem like "free time" but they are important times to refresh and network. In my experience many presenters have asked, "Is it OK if I go overtime?" From my experience, and other attendees I have talked to, it feels socially awkward to say no and thereby disappoint the presenter or others who have said yes.

In the event of going over time when there is no speaker following, it can help to give the audience choice about staying. This can be done by saying, "This is the end of my time allowance, so for those of you who need to go, please feel free to leave." This allows them to leave without feeling like they have insulted the speaker by "walking out".

It can happen that a previous speaker may finish late so you may have less time, so it is necessary to be prepared to shorten a presentation. A quick way to cut a presentation short is to say, "In order to keep to time I will have to bring the session to a close now. But I would be happy to talk to anyone later." Finishing on time is appreciated by the audience and the next speaker.

Videoconferencing

Presentation skills are also becoming more important online. Videoconferencing is becoming part of the Learning Advisor's skillset. Wankel, Blessinger, and Wankel (2013) pointed out that videoconferencing is increasingly being used in education to provide students with a more engaging academic environment, to interact with experts and other institutions, and to provide online courses and for professional development. Barlow, Peter, and Barlow (2002) listed a number of considerations when videoconferencing. They recommended:

- Waving hello
- Looking at the camera instead of yourself
- Considering room lighting and colours
- Avoiding high pattern clothes such as stripes
- Wearing neutral solid colour clothes rather than red or yellow
- Removing background visual distractions (clutter or other people)
- Keeping hair out of the face
- Not chewing food or gum
- Wearing make up for both men and women

- Showing no strong emotions or boredom
- Avoiding the wearing of noisy jewellery (bangles)
- Muting coughs or sneezes
- Making no fast gestures that blur on camera

These recommendations show the importance of considering what the technology limits are regarding appearance and movement. They also caution people to be aware of how they appear in a social group setting in which some of the usual conventions still apply, such as not making distracting noises or eating food in front of those who have none. This is important for Learning Advisors to consider when presenting to colleagues or students.

Conclusion

Presentation skills are a core competency required by Learning Advisors and many professionals. Learning Advisors especially need these skills to communicate research supporting their practice and to demonstrate to students how to develop these skills. There have been numerous books and articles written on presentation skills. The important message for Learning Advisors is to embark on a course of action to assess and develop their own presentation skills. This paper has described the basics of how a confident and professional presentation can be achieved in four stages. The first stage involves preparation: planning well ahead through clearly setting audience related focus, knowing the audience, knowing the presentation room, practising, having a checklist and a plan for dealing with nerves. The second stage starts the presentation by setting up the room, having items set up and engaging with the audience as they settle in. The third stage occurs during the session with an engaging tone of voice, relating points to the audience, informatively designed slides, managing time, and smoothly transitioning to question and answer time. The final stage of ending the presentation requires ending on time with an invitation for further discussion later if needed. When the audience sees a relaxed and confident presenter, it sets the tone for an enjoyable session for both the presenter and the audience.

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