

Presentations: A tutor's view (by Gerard Sharpling)

Many students asked me the following question: 'What makes a good presentation?' However, I find that it is rather difficult to say what exactly makes a good presentation. It's a bit like asking 'how long is a piece of string'. When I give presentations myself, I often try to answer this question by putting myself in the position of the audience, and to ask some reflective questions, such as 'Who is my audience?', 'What do they want to know?' and 'How much specialised knowledge do they have?' In other words, one of the things I spend a lot of time on is trying to make sure the presentation is 'pitched' at the right level. This sense of self-reflexivity also extends to practical matters, such as 'If I were listening to myself, as my audience, would I be able to understand everything clearly?' and 'Would I be able to read my own visuals from the back?' I will sometimes have to take a long hard look at myself when answering these questions. The answer are not always what I want to hear.

Although I find it hard to say what makes a good presentation, I know all too well what kind of presentations I get bored with: ones that are too long, ones where I cannot understand the speaker properly, ones where I cannot read the OHT sheets (I am short-sighted), ones where the speaker just reads the visuals or handouts, ones that I cannot hear properly (I do have well below 100% hearing), ones where the diction makes the ideas unintelligible... Let's try and break this down further, however.

I would say that visual aids are very important in some presentations, but not in others. I have seen many outstanding presentations where no OHT transparencies have been used at all. And many conferences rely solely on the spoken word. Perhaps this is because OHTs are often seen, in some cultures or disciplines, a needless distraction. This is especially the case if the speaker simply reads from the OHT transparency, without improvisation or embellishment. This is so pedestrian. Also, I have found that it is all too easy to disguise lack of knowledge and research by 'dressing the presentation up' with PowerPoint fireworks and bells and whistles. If the presentation is interesting and academically engaging, then it will do the job without the need for extraneous visual glory. If the presentation is poor and undermined by lack of knowledge, then unfortunately no amount of IT wizardry will be likely to make it any better. The key is the speaker's ability to engage with the subject.

Still on the subject of visual aids, I have found that it is very common for speakers to totally underestimate the difficulty of seeing or hearing adequately from the back of a classroom. Surely such speakers should realise that there may just be people who are partially sighted or with impaired hearing in the room? I know what it is like sitting in a room being unable to see or hear very well. It takes me quite a long time to process visual/verbal information and I get frustrated if things go too fast for me. I find it useful to make the typeface of my OHT sheets considerably larger than would be the case if I was doing an assignment. I've also seen more OHT sheets with scrawly and often illegible handwriting than I care to remember. In business situations (and we might see academic situations as being similar) this is downright impolite. It is necessary to have

proper respect for one's audience. In some of the best presentations I have been to, the speaker will even ask the audience if they can hear/see all right before getting into the main part of the presentation.

In terms of physical aspects, I sometimes get very 'edgy' if a speaker goes on for a long time without realising he/she has gone overtime. I don't want to stop the student but sometimes this becomes necessary.

Another tricky issue is whether or not one should read aloud or whether one is best advised to refer to notes. There is no really easy answer to this. I have seen many really excellent presentations that have been read aloud, and some really awful ones where the speaker has tried to talk without notes. Perhaps the problem with reading is that the information density is very high, and so the reader has to read much more slowly than they expect. But if a student can deal with this, why not let them?

Now to a distinctly worrying aspect of many presentation course books, that is, the need for eye contact. I have even known people who have penalised students for not maintaining eye contact. This is, however, a very sensitive issue, and depends on many cultural and gender issues. In the West, I have found that people wrongly attribute lack of eye contact to a lack of trustworthiness. But again, I go back to what I said before. If the presentation is engaging and interesting, eye contact is probably something of an irrelevance.

By way of summary, I don't think there is any one 'way' of presenting. I present things very differently depending on whether the group is small or large, and depending on their level of knowledge. Using Power Point is obviously justified when I talk to a group of over 300 students. On the other hand, to go to these lengths when talking to a small group of peers seems quite ridiculous. Similarly, it is rather unnecessary for students doing small group presentations to start by saying 'Good morning' (they've probably said it before anyway), 'Thank you for coming' (the students have no choice in the matter, so why thank them?) and 'Welcome to this presentation'. Ending with 'Thank you for listening' is also unnecessarily deferential.