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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

How to make Yours one of the Good presentations

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"The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through". Sydney J. Harris

> "Remember that you have a limited time. You can't cover all

We've all seen them at conferences. You pop into the room to wait for the interesting paper to start. Two minutes later you engrossed in the presentation even though the topic isn't in your field. We've also forced ourselves to stay awake through

of the details in your paper and no, you can't just read faster, that would decrease the audience's understanding! And ideally you won't be reading anyway.

the bad ones even though the topic is interesting. What is the difference? It is how the information is communicated.

So how do you make yours on of the good ones? Communicate, communicate, communicate.

"Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life".
Brian Tracy

Your paper is not your presentation

They are different things with different goals.

Your paper is a written item with a detailed rational argument in support of your thesis. People need to take time to understand and respond to the depth of material covered in a paper. In your paper every word is carefully chosen to support your argument.

Your presentation is 10-15 minutes to summarise your paper and convince people the thesis is exciting enough to want to read more about. This means you have to connect with your audience. What can you assume they know? What do you want them to know at the end of your talk? And remember people pay more attention if you let them know what's in it for them.

> *"To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others".* Tony Robbins

Since we are focused on presentation let's begin by understanding that there are multiple steps in the process of communication.

- The idea must find a form in the presenter's words
- Those words must be transmitted to the audience
- The audience must receive the transmission
- Finally, the audience must convert the words back into an idea.

If everything works right, the ideas match and we had a great communication. If anything goes wrong, then some or all of the idea gets lost. We can't do much about the last part except to make sure the audience receives as much information as possible in the best ways possible. As a presenter transmitting and receiving go hand in hand so we'll look at those two together.

Giving the Idea a Form

Organization

Just as you went through a process to organise your paper – so too your presentation needs to be organised. Should they have the same or different organisation? It depends on what you need to communicate. There are many different structures that can be used beyond the one in the paper. Chronological, physical layout, problem/solution and compare/contrast all are options for how you could choose to present your thesis. Choose wisely!

Remember that you have a limited time. You can't cover all of the details in your paper and no, you can't just read faster, that would decrease the audience's understanding! And ideally you won't be reading anyway.

Wording

That's right, no reading. We'll cover the why a little later but for now just accept it. If you are working with visual aids (and you should) most of what you display will be short bullet points. If for some reason there are no visual aids planned, then your cue cards should be short bullet points. Each card should have around 4 bullet points, and each one should only be 4 words long.

I know – I hear it constantly…. But if I only have bullet points then how do I know what to say?

Practice. Out loud. Several times.

Think of each bullet as the headline of a newspaper story. Now, using 2-3 sentences, tell the story then move on to the next bullet. Just the way these sentences tell the story of the subheading above.

The point of practicing out loud is to give your brain a chance to sort out the wording. The first time through will feel rough. You will say "um" a fair number of times. By the third or fourth run through your brain will be comfortable knowing what you want to say about each bullet point. The best part is you won't need to read it, or memorise specific words. You just talked it out and if the wording changes a bit from time to time that's fine too. Trust yourself – you know this stuff!

> *"Make sure you are understood. Don't blame the other person for not understanding. Instead look for ways to clarify or rephrase what you are trying to say so it can be understood".* Joel Garfinkle

Practice also helps determine the timing on your presentation.

Remember the mantra – four words, four bullet points.

Some more hints on wording for you to make it more interesting for your audience.

- Focus on the positive
  - It is easier to understand than negative statements, and people react better to the positive
- Active voice engages audiences
  - Just like in writing passive voice will pull your audience down
- Gender neutral language pleases
  - Unless you need specifics try and stay neutral, it avoids upsetting audience members
- Positive phrases convey strength
  - Yes, this is the academic world and thus we will never be 100% sure, but stronger phrases convey commitment and strength. They can read the paper to get all the caveats
- Strong phrases move audiences
  - Instead of using phrases like "I would like to" or "As I said" aim for short declarative sentences

Transmitting and Receiving the Presentation

> *"The ability to express an idea is well-nigh as important as the idea itself".* Bernard Baruch

Who is the audience?

The first and perhaps hardest lesson to learn is that your audience isn't you – and worse – they aren't all the same person. Some people absorb information best when they hear it, others do better when they see it. Some of your audience may not be native speakers of your presentation language and hence may not understand the words they hear as well. You might not be a native speaker of your presentation language and that might impact the transmission.

Using visual aids in your presentation more than doubles the flow of data to your audience. Hopefully this will improve the reception since we are offering more ways to receive the information.

CAVEAT! If you are going to use PowerPoint (and you should) – then learn to use it well. Using it badly can be worse than not using it at all. See *Visual Aids for Presentations* article.

> *"It always comes back to the audience you are trying to reach and which way they think".* Brian Clark

Connect with your audience

If there is a connection with your audience, the information flows more freely. How can you form that connection? Many of the usual presentation tricks you won't have time for but a few can fit in your 10-15 minutes.

- Thank the audience
  - Thank them for inviting you. Their time is valuable as well – remember that.
  - This also gives you time to adjust to being in front of the group. Of course you are nervous. Slowly scan across the entire audience as you thank them. Note where the exits are. It will make your subconscious relax a little more.
  - If you have time say something to help form the connection. Refer to something a previous speaker said that will come up in your talk, or that is related.
- Get out from behind the podium
  - Stand on the audience's left – this is where their eyes want to go after looking at the visual cue (in Western cultures).
  - Take an open stance – hands at your sides. It projects confidence and makes you more accessible. And yes – it feels vulnerable.
  - Reach out to your audience from time to time. It forms a bridge. And yes – it feels silly.
- Talk to your audience
  - Pick one audience member. Speak one phrase of your sentence to them. Choose a new member of the audience and finish your sentence to them. Keep repeating this process. This helps your audience connect directly to you.
- Look at your audience!
  - If you are looking away more than a few seconds per minute your audience will assume you care more about what you are looking at than them.

That last point bears some additional comments. If you are looking down at your printed paper, reading the words, struggling to keep track of your place, and occasionally glancing up very briefly at your audience – that connection won't form. Your attention needs to be on your audience, adjusting your talk as they need. That means you need to have learned what you want to say – not reading it, and not memorising a speech. That is the point of the practice we spoke of earlier.

> *"To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others".* Tony Robbins

About Author:
Neil Peterson is a Project Manager with over 20 years of practice. A PM's job is 70-90% communicating hence presentation skills is a regular aspect of training for Project Managers.

He strongly recommends “Presenting to Win: The art of telling your story” by Jerry Weissman for those wishing to learn more.

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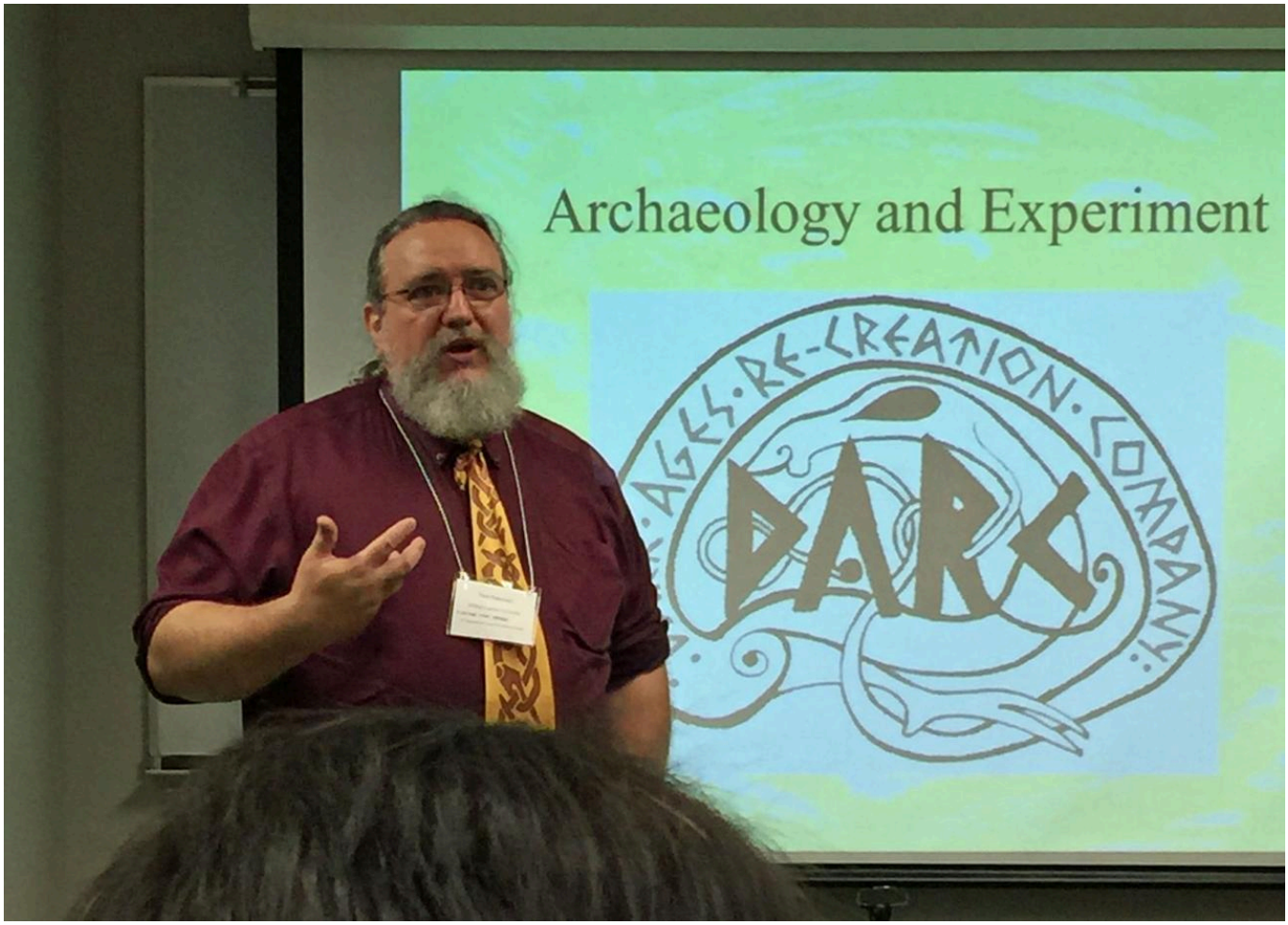

FIG 1. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER. HERE THE SPEAKER IS ON THE AUDIENCE'S LEFT SIDE. THEY ARE LOOKING AT THE AUDIENCE AND THE RIGHT HAND IS FORMING A GESTURE. EACH OF THESE ELEMENTS HELPS THE AUDIENCE CONNECT WITH THE SPEAKER.