

# IMPROVING PRESENTATION SKILLS AMONG BUSINESS STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The teaching of presentation skills is no longer the exclusive purview of communications courses. Their central role in a variety of business courses, ranging from marketing, entrepreneurship, and management to accounting, finance, and strategy mirrors their use by professionals in all fields. This paper presents and discusses a number of unusual and unique techniques useful for enhancing students' presentation skills.*

## INTRODUCTION

“All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts...” [William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616), "As You Like It", Act 2 scene 7] (Art of Europe 2006).

What Shakespeare wrote about almost 400 years ago has wide applicability for those today training for careers in a wide variety of fields. The conducting of business, even for the lone entrepreneur, requires interaction with others: suppliers, channel intermediaries, and of course, customers. For those businesspeople working within an organization we can add to that list co-workers, subordinates, and individuals higher up on the organizational ladder. A significant portion of these interactions involves making presentations. While the size of the audience will differ, and the formality of proceedings will range from very causal to very structured, there are many facets that share a common reservoir of skills. As educators, the activities and training we design into our courses can accomplish multiple goals. The acquiring of content knowledge is not at odds with the development of skills, including presentation skills.

Good communication skills, both oral and written, are needed to be successful in any profession (e.g. see Luthy 2000 and 2006 for importance to sales position). This fact is widely recognized by employers, college faculty, and education accreditation organizations. AACSB International – The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) states that the curriculum should include learning experiences in the area of communication abilities (AACSB 2006). A study by Gustafson, Johnson, and Hovey (1993) surveyed students, alumni and employers and concluded that effective communications skills are vital in 1) gaining a job upon graduation and 2) advancing up the corporate ladder. Dorn (1999) and Muir (1996) concluded that determining how to best teach these skills is difficult, but vital to the eventual success of the students.

Good oral presentation skills encompasses many aspects of communication, both planned and unplanned. Planned components include such things as preparation of the speech, visual aids, notes, handouts, location, and type of audience. Unplanned components include, diction, pace, poise, confidence and/or nervousness, dealing with disruptions and interruptions.

Educational business and communication literature concerning these unplanned aspects indicates that most faculty work broadly with the student on the overall individual presentation but do not focus on

how to eliminate much of the noise. The primary method of improving presentation skills is the videotaping of the presentation and critiquing the presentation by the instructor and the student (see generally Lucas (2001), Muir (1996), and Pittenger (2004)). While this is an excellent way of studying a student's pace, poise and apparent level of confidence, it does little to assist the student in how to eliminate any deficiencies in the presentation. Another method used is to have students give impromptu speeches whereby the student must think creatively on their feet. This method is designed to help the students develop poise and confidence.

The purpose of this paper is to disseminate the practices and experiences of some instructors in the MBA program at one AACSB accredited university (beyond those normally used techniques previously mentioned) to help students eliminate the 'noise' in their presentations. Specific attention is placed on techniques that help students reduce unnecessary hand and body movements and adjust to disruptions interruptions in the presentation.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the MBA programs at one AACSB accredited university in the south, at the beginning of their studies students' academic and business backgrounds are assessed and students are placed in teams constructed to represent a diversity of talents and skills. The students remain in the same teams throughout the entire MBA program (with the exception of elective courses). In these teams, the level of experience, anxiety, and skill with making presentations varies.

This approach or variations of it are practiced in the majority of MBA programs. And as there is a great deal of overlap in the content portion of many MBA programs, team and individual presentations are integral parts of most programs. At our university, presentation skills are taught in the first semester of the program and are continually refined in the remaining classes. Some unique methods are used to highlight flaws in presentations styles and to help students deal with the unexpected things that may happen during 'real-world' presentations.

Too often presentations are assigned as end-of-academic term activities for students, either as individual assignments or for teams of students. Commensurate with their status a significant percentage of a student's course grade is typically tied to how well they do on the presentation. Frequently however, training and opportunities to gain feedback on presentation skills and techniques is relegated to a communications course, many taken semesters or years earlier or in some instances it is considered a "training in the field" experience with feedback and suggestions coming the equivalent of "after the horse has escaped the barn" once the presentation is completed. There are a number of techniques that can be incorporated into a course design that allow students to improve and refine their presentation skills prior to an end of semester project.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

Chief among the possibilities to improve students' presentation skills, is the impromptu speech. Student can either be given a few minutes (5-10) to put their thoughts together on a topic of their choosing, or one supplied by the instructor. On the subject of the latter, one scenario that has worked well involves telling the student that some important visitors are on their way from the airport to tour the company. The person responsible for meeting them (the President) has been delayed and they need them (the student) to meet with them and tell them a bit about the city (or company, etc.) until the President arrives. By drawing on knowledge the student already has (their city, their company) little or no preparation time is realistically needed.

A variation on the impromptu presentation, but equally workable and useful with an upgraded speech is for the presenter to use a pair of boxing or cardio gloves. In many instances students are unaware of the extent to which they overuse hand gestures. The gloves make it much more noticeable to the wearer. Also, if the presentation is videotaped, it makes viewing of the behavior much more pronounced.

A second variation on the impromptu speech, but one not workable with the use of gloves, is to assign and have each student perform a card magic trick for a small number of students in front of the room. This assignment calls on students to be able to interact with an audience, manipulate a prop, and develop a sales pitch (or patter) appropriate for the trick.

Another technique which may be used in many situations, for practice or in a graded situation, is to place between 4 and 6 soccer or highway cones on the floor. Students are told that rather than standing behind the podium or desk, they must at some time during their presentation touch each cone with their foot. To perform this smoothly, students must integrate delivery of their planned content with movement.

On the topic of distractions or getting students even further outside their comfort zone, there are a number of different aspects to the presentation that can be altered. Depending on the goals of the instructor and the proficiency level of the students, interruptions (i.e. questions) can be allowed from the audience during the presentation. Just before the presentation is to begin, the instructor can pick one of the team members to be the “out” person – someone who has missed their plane flight is caught in traffic, etc. and cannot deliver their portion of the presentation. Alternatively, the instructor can notify the presenter that the technology (i.e. PowerPoint) has failed and it is not available to them during the presentation. Also, just before the presentation the instructor can introduce additional people to the audience (non-class members) to increase the potential discomfort level.

The videotaping of student presentations is a long standing technique for improving presentation skills. One of the downsides of this approach, as practiced by many instructors, is to limit the feedback to a sample of one – the instructor. When presentations are made in the classroom, employ the rest of the class to assess and provide feedback to the student or their team. The form below, separates the presentation into a content portion and a stylistic portion. In addition to the instructor’s numerical assessments and written comments, the numerical assessments of the class as a whole can also be provided as well as their written comments (anonymously of course). The practice provides both a check and a balance to the instructor’s perspective. The criteria should be used in conjunction with a “check box” format to facilitate evaluation while the presentation is going on (see below for an example).

|              |       |       |            |       |       |           |           |             |
|--------------|-------|-------|------------|-------|-------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| Unacceptable | Poor  | Weak  | Needs Work | Fair  | Good  | Very Good | Excellent | Outstanding |
| 0-72         | 73-75 | 76-78 | 79-80      | 81-85 | 86-88 | 89-91     | 92-96     | 97-99       |
| F            | C     | C+    | B-         | B     | B+    | A-        | A         | A+          |

Grading Rubric: 80% of your grade will be based on the four common criteria below; 20% of your grade will be based on the five individual criteria on the next page.

- Opening/Introduction(s): of topic, people, purpose, gains attention (10%)
- Organization of presentation: Logical flow, anticipation of audience concerns and issues, within time limits (20%)
- Visual component: Design, readability, complexity, graphics and sound/video clip usage, demonstrations, role-plays, etc. (40%)

- Summary /closing / finish / Q&A: not rushed or abrupt, if Q&A responses address questions with appropriate detail (10%)

Body Language (4%)

- ☺ Tall posture / ☹ Rocking or swaying
- ☺ Movement in space / ☹ Hands on hips/in pockets
- ☺ Appropriate gestures / ☹ Busy hands, clapping

Eye Contact (4%)

- ☺ Varied around room / ☹ Staring
- ☺ Purposeful/engaging / ☹ Reading screen/script
- ☺ Engaging / ☹ Remote/overly-detached

Vocal Qualities (4%)

- ☺ Projection / ☹ Too loud or soft
- ☺ Appropriate pace / ☹ Too fast/slow, no pausing
- ☺ Varied intonation / ☹ Droning/monotone

Smooth Delivery (4%)

- ☺ Confident / ☹ Quavering
- ☺ Rhythmic flow / ☹ Unsure
- ☺ No vocalisms / ☹ Ahs, ums

Style (4%)

- ☺ Conveys enthusiasm / ☹ Nervous
- ☺ Appropriate dress / ☹ Inappropriate

## SUGGESTIONS FOR OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

The videotaping of a presentation only represents an opportunity to improve if that video is watched by the individual or team. Requiring students to watch and critique their own presentation helps to complete the circle of coaching and allows the students to begin to develop the skill of self-diagnosis of weaknesses.

A variation on watching the videotape as it was shot is to have students watch the tape with the sound turned off in order for them to focus on the non-verbal aspects of their presentation (gestures, movement, eye contact, etc.). Another additional viewing of the tape, this time at an accelerated speed, can also bring out observations that can improve presentation techniques for the future. This is especially effective if a table top podium is used, where the presenter's legs can be seen/taped. Nervous movements such as swaying from side to side, crossing of feet, etc. which may seem innocuous when viewed at regular speed take on a much more pronounced effect when played back at an accelerated speed. As one of the authors commented, it can look like they are "doing a jig."

## CONCLUSIONS

The various suggestions made here range from the free to the very cost effective. All involve defusing the anxiety most students experience at the thought of making presentations. Depending on the number and type of presentation experiences an instructor had built into their courses, a great deal can be accomplished using some or many of the techniques presented here.

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