



Improving Undergrad Presentation Skills

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Abstract

Higher education programs have historically done an excellent job of providing students with a firm knowledge base in various subject areas. This success is only half of the story in today's ever changing economy and job market. Undergraduate students who are transitioning from college to the workplace must have adequate oral communication skills to complement the technical knowledge they have acquired in their collegiate experience. Students must be able to orally present and communicate ideas, knowledge, and research to many different audiences in the arenas of interviews, conferences, and interoffice presentations. Although helpful in a variety of careers, improvements to communication skills at the undergraduate level can specifically increase the success and effectiveness of those moving into the field of engineering management. These communication skills can increase the engineering manager's performance in areas such as leadership, motivation, selling, and marketing. This meta-analysis will highlight and bring forth a number of ideas to improve oral presentation skills at an undergraduate level.

Introduction

Colleges and universities are set up to provide an education that will allow their graduates to become successful and contributing members of today's global economy¹. Every year millions of students finish their undergraduate education and search for employment in their respective fields. Students with degrees in fields such as business, art, physics, and engineering have amassed a knowledge and skillset from the university they attended. Within this acquired skillset is a specific proficiency that has, in recent times, required more attention: oral communication.

Employers are continuously looking for students who excel in the ability to present information orally. Instances that require effective oral communication include working in teams, dealing with customers, and making presentations at trade shows and conferences². A study was done by the Peter D. Hart Research Associates in which hundreds of companies completed a survey. The employees at these companies had acquired at least a bachelor's degree. Employers were asked about the skills that potential hires should possess, as well as what learning outcomes universities should put more focus on. Results reflected the importance of oral communication skills in current society. Approximately 30% of the companies believed that strong oral and communication skills were important in new hires and 73% of the companies believed that more focus should be placed in this area¹.

Improved communication skills are not foreign to leadership as reflected in the field of engineering management. The Engineering Management Body of Knowledge³ describes communications as a necessary role for the engineering manager relative to selling and marketing. Training engineering management (EM) undergrads in the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of presentation provides them foundation for selling ideas for products and process improvements and or development throughout their careers. The proper ability to present material in a logical, clear, and informative manner is a vital component of the soft skills of engineering managers in the management of employee emotions as proposed by Kaplan⁴. The engineering manager's job is to work directly with the engineers to provide leadership,

motivation, and guidance within an organizational framework of structure and culture. Leadership, motivation and guidance require the KSAs associated with communications. The activities and suggestions of this paper can be employed to strengthen the communication skillset within aspiring engineering managers as well as practicing engineering managers needing further communications KSA development.

So how is it that these oral communication skills are to be improved in the collegiate atmosphere? This paper will review a variety of ideas and methodology to strengthen the oral communication skills of undergraduate students. Some suggestions will be tips for student to improve oral presentations, while others shed light on pedagogical approaches to the problem. Various methods of presenting information orally are considered as well.

Importance

To begin a discussion of a topic, the topic should be completely defined first. What exactly is considered oral communication? Oral communication can be described as the process of verbally transmitting information and ideas from one individual or group to another⁵. Communication can be decomposed into several individual elements that further define the term. Elements of communication, as shown through research into small, medium, and large enterprise, include:

- Listening and understanding
- Speaking clearly and directly
- Negotiating responsively
- Persuading effectively
- Understanding the needs of internal and external customers
- Establishing and using networks⁶

There are different instances in which a student will use oral communication in their career. Situations in which the person engages in face-to-face conversations, group discussions, counseling, presentations, interview, radio, television and telephone calls all represent instances that require developed oral communication skills.

Through oral communication a variety of goals are accomplished. Effective communication skills will provide the student with a toolkit to help them in a range of ways. These skills can improve their academic performance by allowing for investigation, comprehension and communication of ideas, problem solving, as well as furthering understanding of concepts⁷. The ability to discuss topics with faculty and other classmates provides a chance to extend knowledge to others and receive it as well. Students can grapple with ideas, share thoughts, enrich understanding and solve problems through basic communication practices⁷.

Communication skills and insights form an important basis for employability⁸. Employers have shown that potential hires who show effective oral communication are much more desired. Figure 1 shows a breakdown of a survey done asking employers what qualities they believed to be the most important among the people they interviewed for a job at their company. This figure shows the importance that oral communication skills have in the business world. It is not just that 30% of the employers surveyed believed that these skills were important, but also its relative comparison to all other skills. Communication ranked in the top three of the required skills. Not

only that, but teamwork skills ranked first and it can be argued that strong oral communication skills are a significant component of effective teamwork skills. The belief that communication skills are a vital trait for new hires extends beyond employer sentiment; students believe it as well. According to Figure 1, 37% of recent graduates surveyed believed that communication abilities were important to employers and the employment process. Both factions feel that emphasis must be put into developing these skills in the collegiate setting. A student's employment options will be increased if effective training in verbal communication can be administered⁶.

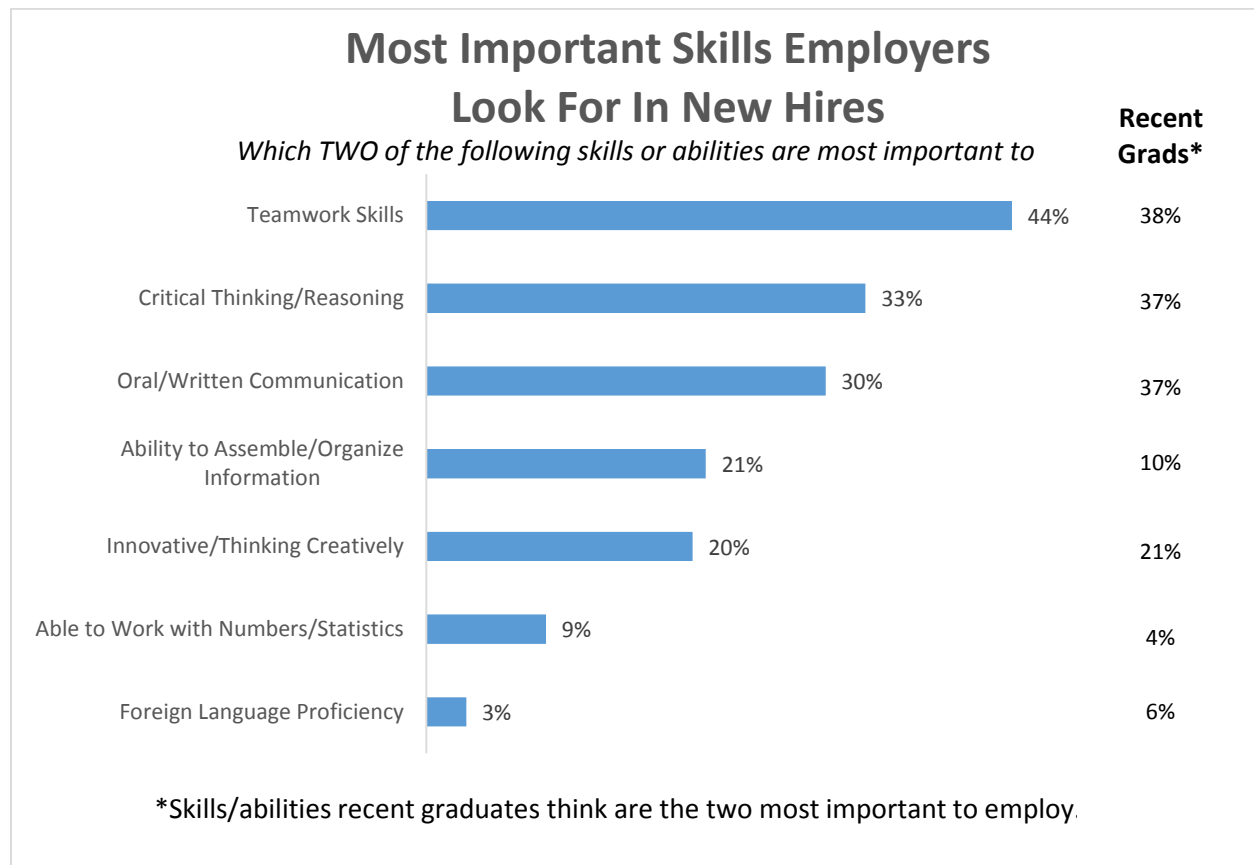


Figure 1: Survey results of important skills of potential hires¹.

Research-specific fields, such as science, require the exchange of ideas. Today's scientific climate lies in an era of abundant and dynamic scientific discoveries and research⁸. Add on the advances in technology and the increased availability of media, as compared to previous years, and a paradigm exists that requires an ability to effectively explain research to fellow scientists, stakeholders, and public audiences in face-to-face and broadcast forums⁸. Furthermore, researchers are even having to explain their findings to entities outside of the science field. These entities can include various private and non-scientific communities, even including the federal government⁹. It is in this instance that students must have a firm core of communication principles and practices to be able to effectively transmit their ideas and findings.

Causes

The importance of developing and teaching these effective communication skills is apparent, but, in order to find a solution, the problems with oral communication skills must be defined and addressed. A focus on oral presentations is necessary to determine the major factors that cause students to present material in a manner deemed unsatisfactory.

At the very core of the problem lies a single element: fear. For the large majority of people, fear keeps them from not only excelling at a task (whether simple or complex), but from even attempting the task at all. Between the years of 2001 and 2003, the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCSR) conducted a survey of 9,282 people asking them about common fears¹⁰. In addition to this survey, a Gallup poll asked 1,016 people about a list of 13 fears. The results of these surveys can be found in Figure 2.

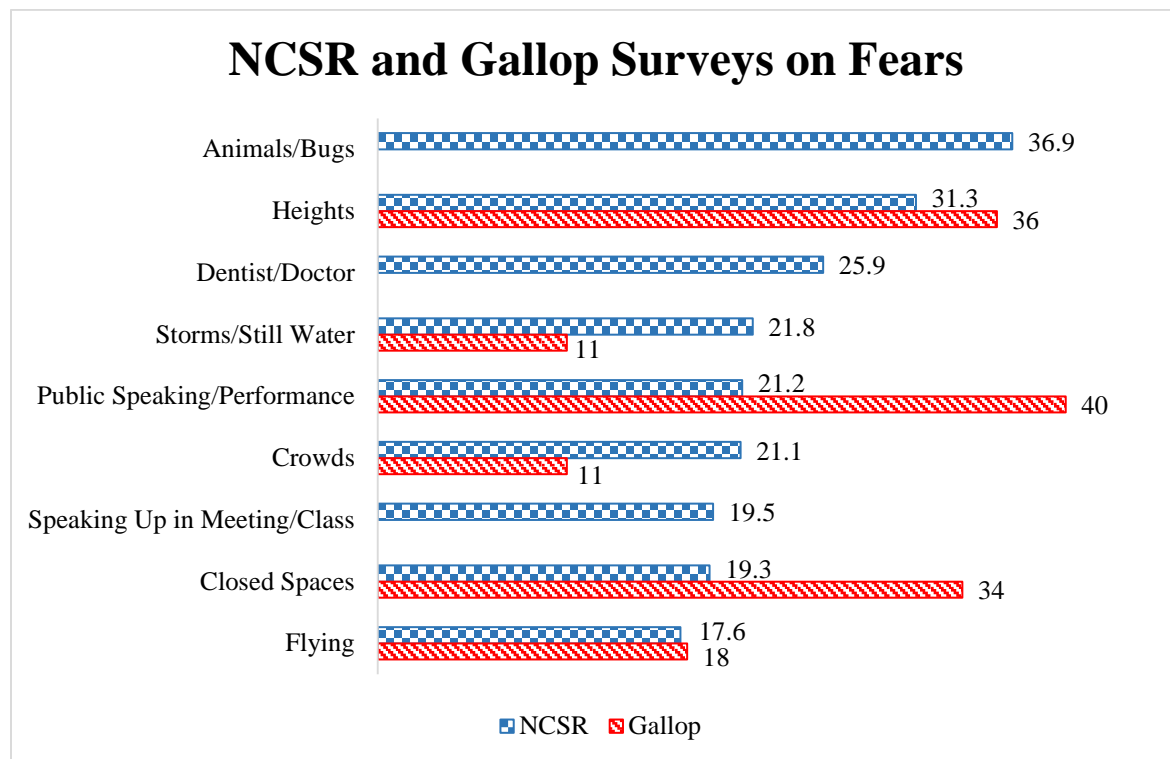


Figure 2: Specific fears and crowds (gray) and comparable fears from 2001 Gallup poll (red)¹⁰

The results of both surveys show that people find speaking in front of others as a major fear. The NCSR shows that 21.2% of the 9282 people asked have a legitimate fear of public speaking, but this value could go as high as 42.3% if paired with the fear of crowds. The Gallup poll resulted in 40% of the 1016 people screened considering fear of public speaking as a major fear.

It is this innate element of the human psyche that puts every person, including undergraduate students, at a distinct disadvantage when performing tasks of oral communication. So a genuine fear has been established, but what have studies shown to be the cause of this fear? Researchers

have suggested that there are eleven causes to a person's fear of presentations¹¹. These elements activate the fear, lead to stress, which in turn affects the person's ability to appropriately and clearly present ideas. The eleven elements are¹¹:

- Thinking that public speaking is inherently stressful
- Thinking you need to be brilliant or perfect to succeed
- Trying to impart too much information or cover too many points in a short presentation
- Having the wrong purpose in mind
- Trying to please everyone
- Trying to emulate other speakers (rather than simply being yourself)¹²
- Failing to be personally revealing and humble
- Being fearful of potential negative outcomes
- Trying to control the wrong things (such as behavior of the audience)¹²
- Spending too much time over preparing (instead of developing confidence and trust in your natural ability to succeed)¹².
- Thinking your audience will be critical of your performance

Improving the oral communication and presentation skills of students means that universities must battle against innate fears. Within the collegiate curriculum there must be measures taken that will reduce the fears and anxiety of public speaking. The ultimate question still exists: what steps must be taken to improve presentation skills and reduce fears?

Solutions

Researching solutions to the oral presentation dilemma provided numerous approaches.

Solutions include: reductions of fears/anxieties through practice, providing knowledge through tips and education, and skills training programs for ineffective speakers.

How has it been shown that these solutions can be effective in creating better public speakers? A study was completed by Marshall, Parker, and Hayes¹³ that determined the most successful way to treat public speaking problems. Tested were the methods of flooding and providing specific skills training. The flooding procedure is based on eliminating the fear component of public speaking (the main culprit of ineffective public speakers) through prolonged practice. Through this practice the goal of anxiety reduction was to be accomplished. Skills training involved providing appropriate/inappropriate public speaking practices, modeling appropriate behaviors, performance feedback, and direct discussion of feedback. Multiple studies were conducted in which four treatments were considered: no treatment, flooding, skills training, and combination of flooding/skills¹³.

To quantitatively measure the results, researchers used a Behavioral Checklist (BCL) that consisted of observable behaviors exhibited by subjects. Two components make up the BCL. The BCL₁ includes "direct manifestations of anxiety" such as blushing, trembling, and sweating. The BCL₂ includes "habitual coping responses" such as body sways and avoiding eye contact. Along with the BCL was the Checklist of Appropriate Speaking Behaviors (CASB) that provided a measure of acceptable behaviors that the BCL failed to cover. The results of the behavioral study can be found in Figs. 3-5 below.

The study showed that when left untended, public speaking problems will continue to persist. Two of the treatments, flooding and combination, showed a significant lessening of anxiety induced responses on the BCL₁ scale. Prior to the treatment the mean BCL₁ scores ranged from 7 to 9 for each of the treatment groups. As the experiment proceeded into the mid-treatment phase, there were significant reductions in BCL₁ scores for the flooding, skills, and combination treatments. By the end of the experiment, both the flooding and combination treatments continued to show success, resulting in a BCL₁ score range of 1 to 3. Although not as successful, the skill treatment did lower the BCL₁ score of the treatment group to 6. The important outcome of the research was that the administered treatments resulted in a reduction of anxiety induced responses to public speaking, whereas no treatment failed to produce similar results.

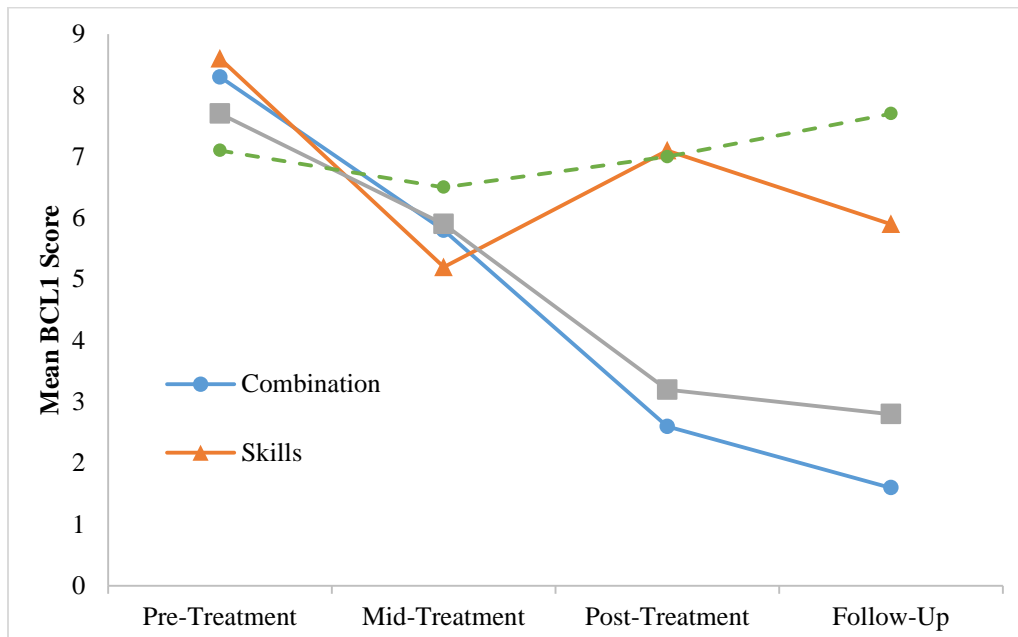


Figure 3: Results for BCL₁¹³

As far as the habitual coping responses (BCL₂), all three treatments showed success in reducing the existence of such behaviors. Anxiety induced responses (BCL₁, BCL₂) increased in the “no treatment” group over the course of the study, as shown by the dashed line in Figs. 3 and 4, while appropriate behavior patterns drastically decreased (as shown in Figure 5). The prolonged practice (flooding) showed to be the best method, but skills training showed adequate success as well. The treatment that would most likely be used in an educational setting would be the combination of flooding and skills training, which showed an effectiveness similar to flooding in all three scales.

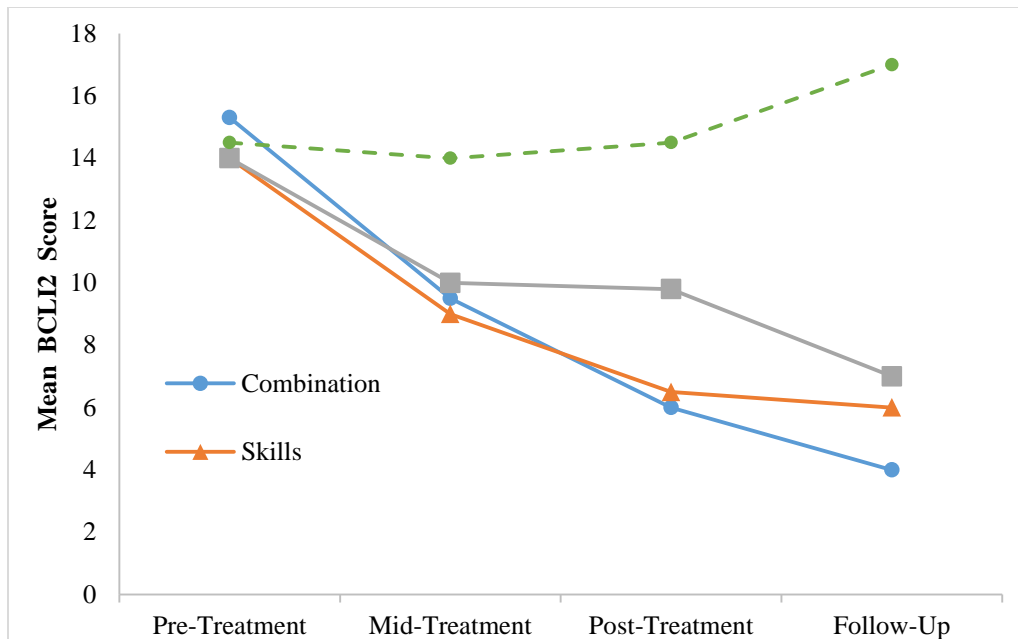


Figure 4: Results for BCL₂¹³

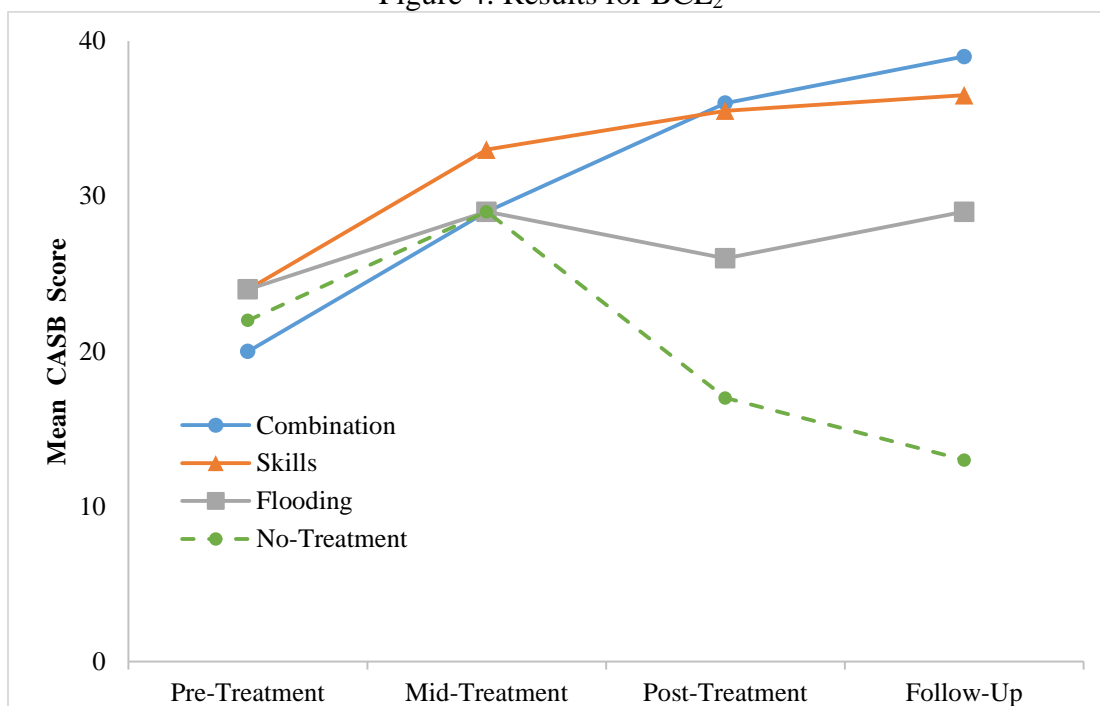


Figure 5: Results for CASB¹³

This study provides a basis for success in terms of improving undergraduate oral presentation skills for undergraduate students. The solutions provided in this paper contain components that can be classified as either flooding or skills training. Although the solutions have been gathered from various researchers and sources, each can have a positive effect on the ability of undergraduate students to share information via oral presentations.

Providing knowledge

In academia, a common solution to any problem is better education on the subject. To begin remedying the lack of oral presentation skills developed in undergraduate students, instructors should provide information on what makes a quality presentation. This information should cover all aspects of the presentation: preparation, information, and execution. Students, when given knowledge on a subject, tend to feel more prepared and can better learn how to succeed in their presentations.

When students are to begin preparing their presentation there are several factors they should keep in mind. If students are well versed and pay close attention to these factors, then they may have a better chance of being successful in their presentations during their collegiate career. Building on this confidence can make their presentations outside of college effective and professional. The following questions should be considered by the presenter: who is their audience, where are they presenting, what are they presenting, how will they deliver the presentation, will extra materials be needed.

Who is the audience?

Several researchers, such as Starver and Shellenbarger¹⁴ have come to a consensus that the first step an effective speaker considers is their audience. Before any PowerPoint-type, poster, or script is considered the speaker must seek and gather information about their audience. Knowing specifics about an audience will help the speaker to setup an appropriate presentation.

There are several audience considerations to take into account. Firstly, audience size should be considered. Knowing whether the presenter will be speaking to 10 or 100 will help the presenter to determine the format and materials that will be needed. An audience of 100 will require different resources than a smaller crowd¹⁴.

Another important audience characteristic is the demographic information of the audience. Starver and Shellenbarger¹⁴ believe that information such as age, gender, educational background, work experience, and ethnicity are all important details to note. The more background information that a presenter can find, the better they can tailor their presentation to the needs of the viewers. A better guarantee that information presented will be relevant to the audience can be made with this information, resulting in better quality presentation.

Furthermore, the knowledge level of the viewers must be considered so that the amount of details given on a topic is appropriate¹⁴. For example, if the audience consists of engineering majors, then explanations of vocabulary such as moment, stress, and strain are extraneous. On the other hand, if the audience is unfamiliar with these terms, then perhaps they should be omitted or other words take their place. A presentation can easily go awry if the vocabulary or subject matter is beyond the realm of understanding of the audience, potentially causing the presenter to doubt themselves in current and future presentations.

Where is the presentation?

A common aspect of presentations that students tend to completely overlook is the physical place in which they will be presenting. As mentioned earlier, there is an innate fear that students have about presenting, and any source of anxiety must be taken care of prior to the presentation. Imagine preparing a PowerPoint-type, just to find out that no computer is available in the room that will be used. This could have disastrous and lasting results on the speaker.

There are many small details that speakers do not consider when creating their material. One detail that should be taken into account is the setup of the stage where the speaker will be standing. Some rooms provide space so that the speaker can move around freely, while others only allow room for them to stand behind a podium. In addition, the way the audience is seated can have an effect as well. Presentations, depending on the subject matter, may need to include group discussions. Rooms in which the audience is seated in a round-table formation provide excellent opportunities for group discussion. Audience members who are involved in the discussion can comfortably see who is talking and may interact with each other more easily. Alternatively, a setup where the audience members are in rows may make this more difficult.

As mentioned before, the available technology plays a key role. It is important to get confirmation that appropriate technologies are available such as computers, speakers, and projectors. Students share a fear that technology will let them down at the worst moment possible, and seemingly ordinary tasks on a computer become impossibly difficult. Many times this happens due to simple anxiety over having to give a presentation in front of a large group of people. The student should always, as good practice, have multiple ways to access PowerPoint-types or other files. Prior to the day of presentation, the presenter should be sure that all links, audio, and visual files work as intended. These checks will add to the quality of the presentation and alleviate some of the anxiety.

What is being presented?

Once all of the logistics have been taken care of, it is important for the presenter to determine what exactly needs to be covered in their presentation. In the undergraduate setting, it is normal practice for the professor to supply the students with a general topic to be discussed. It is then the students' job to assemble a presentation according to the provided guidelines. Although, in college, this is the common practice, it must be said that it is important for the student to determine themselves what the goal of the presentation will be. What is the message that they are trying to convey to the audience?

Starver and Shellenbarger¹⁴ again provide interesting insight into the matter of developing content. They mention that it is not enough to just develop a purpose for the presentation, but it is imperative that the speaker keeps this purpose in mind throughout the development of the presentation. This practice will help the presenter to determine what information is relevant to the goal and will help to keep the presentation concise. An important tip for the presenter is for them to put themselves in the audience's shoes. They, as an audience member, should ask themselves questions such as "How does this message affect me?" and "How can I use the information from this presentation?"¹⁴. Honestly answering this questions will help to extricate unneeded information from the presentation.

Continuing in the preparation process, after a goal has been decided on, the student needs to consider an outline that they will follow. In what order will the information be presented? Depending on the topic, multiple approaches can be used. Typically following a chronological structure is a good practice, but a problem and solution approach can work as well. Alternatively, students may use a more narrative approach, which will allow them to discuss their topic in a story-telling fashion¹⁴. The important point to take home is that the students need to feel as if they have options on how they can present information. Providing them these options will embed versatility and evoke more creative ways of delivering the material.

Beyond determining the goal and setting up an outline lies only filling in the details. Students do well with this part because it is usually the part of preparation they skip to first. If they can incorporate more planning prior to simply throwing facts and figures onto a slide they will find more success. It can be again stated that any information that is put into the presentation should be appropriate and concise.

How will the presentation be delivered?

It is important that students consider the way they will deliver their information. Aspects of delivery include: opening, attire, voice projection, and body language. Each of these components are important to engaging the audience and providing validity to the presentation.

The opening of a presentation can be the make-or-break point for audience reception. Presenters need to capitalize on this opportunity as it is the point in the presentation that should help “capture the audience attention, convey the subject matter, build rapport with the audience, and set the tone and rules for the presentation”¹⁵. Careful consideration should be taken in the opening portion of the presentation, as failure to procure any of the stated objectives can lead to a disinterested audience and a lackluster presentation.

When students consider a presentation, their dress and body language rarely rank high in their list of crucial components. As mentioned before, students must take into consideration the audience composition and their dress should reflect accordingly. When students dress appropriately it provides them with less distraction, allowing them to focus on what they are saying. Students should be well-versed in the essentials of professional dress¹⁶. Specific considerations should be made such as wearing comfortable clothing, avoid wearing distracting jewelry, and ensuring that clothing is clean and well fitted. If these considerations are taken seriously, then the presenter will have a better chance of establishing respect with the audience¹⁴.

Intangibles such as voice projection and body language add to the validity and quality of an oral presentation. How a message is presented can many times be more important than the actual message itself. Undergraduate students who deal with the fear of presenting should consider steps to practice vocal skills, if lacking. There are methods to overcoming the fear and nervousness that can cause poor vocal skills. The usage of recording devices during practice presentations can be an easy way of determining where vocal improvement is needed¹⁴. Students should be conscious of the vocal tone used in their presentations. Paying attention to the tone used helps to ensure that the correct message is being transmitted. Starver and Shellenbarger¹⁴ provide the following guidelines for vocal delivery:

- Tone should be confident as opposed to authoritative
- Increase and decrease volume to add emphasis to main points
- Pause prior to making important points to help with audience focus
- Avoid sounding monotone
- Choose a correct tempo to allow information to be communicated clearly

Lastly, students should consider the effects that body language have on their audience and message. Students need to use nonverbal communication as a tool to support verbal communication. A bad habit of undergraduate students is poor positioning during presentations. It is key that the students face the audience and not the projected materials. Students tend to face the presentation screen and read from slides, causing a disconnect with their audience. Other

common bad habits are nervous gestures. These gestures include clicking pens and playing with loose change, both taking focus off of the presentation.

Early experience

It is vital for students to be exposed to oral presentations early in their collegiate careers. Many colleges wait until the later stages of their programs to begin instruction in presentations. This practice leaves students and faculty with little time to promote, practice, and hone skills. Oral communication skills must be introduced and developed early, and not delayed until post graduate or after they enter the workforce⁸. A high value has been placed on developing these skills early in an undergraduate curriculum and when students have this early experience they are given a strong foundation for developing their presentations skills¹⁷. Late integration of oral communication education are deemed to be less effectively developed, according to surveyed academics. These academics believe that if left to a late capstone experience or independent practice by the student, that communication skills will be underdeveloped¹⁸.

Chan⁶ believes that science programs (although the same point can be made for any curriculum) fail their students by using the latter part of the program to continually teach and establish technical skills. He believes that, alternatively, these final experiences should be used to “reinforce the necessary effective professional communication abilities” that students may use in the real world. If this practice can be put to use, the students will leave the program better equipped and prepared to communicate in their careers.

Improving verbal communication competence

Kristen Lucas proposes a very interesting approach to improving oral communication skills of students in her journal article entitled *Oral Self Critique: Raising Student Consciousness of Communication (In)Competence*. She has developed an activity that will focus on what she believes is the basic building block to a students’ communication ability. The activity will “raise students’ consciousness of their own verbal communication patterns”, providing them also with a starting point from which to improve verbal skills¹⁹. Lucas believes that day-to-day verbal communication is the skill that should require more focus, as teachers seem to focus a lot of time to the common pillars of presentations (i.e., organization, design).

Common to all students’ speech are problematic verbal communication patterns. Students use filler words such as “you know”, “uhh” and “like”. These words are only used to fill space, when the speaker either does not know what to say next or has not prepared properly. When these terms are used the credibility of the student’s presentation suffers. A clear message can be diluted easily with this faulty practice. Not only will the correction of day-to-day speech help with verbal communication, but it will extend to all forms of communication²⁰.

The activity is comprised of three parts where students perform an in-class recording, complete a written assignment, and recorded files are posted to a course management site. To complete the in-class recording, the instructor divides the students into groups and instructs them to share a three to four minute story about an instance in which they observed poor communication. The instance can be from any part of life, not just in a formal presentation or in an academic setting. The purpose of this assignment is to provide the students with an example of their day-to-day verbal communication behaviors. Describing an experience of poor communication lets the

students use everyday language and provides an informal scenario. Students feel as if they are just having a casual conversation with a friend, which is the exact point of focus that Lucas wants to take.

After the students are finished with their story, they take their individual recording and transcribe it exactly as it was spoken. Every word that is spoken on the recording is written down, including filler words. Accuracy of transcription plays a very important part on providing sufficient matter to be analyzed by the student. It will give the student the most honest look at their speaking habits.

Students will then go into a reflection phase of the activity. During the reflection, the students are instructed to answer some leading questions about their speech, and document their answers in a reflection piece. Questions include:

- Are there particular disfluencies, fillers, or expressions that you use too much?
- Do you go off on tangents?
- Do you not complete thoughts?
- Do you talk too fast?
- Do you sound as intelligent and articulate as you would like?

Finally, the students are to choose a single bad habit that they have noticed in their speech and work on correcting the habit. A common, shared example is using a filler word. Students were advised to pay close attention to when they used a filler word. When they thought that they would use the word, they were asked to slow down and focus on avoiding the word. Another point of interest was getting friends and family in on the activity to help with noticing when the habit presented itself.

After all of the phases have been completed, the instructor would lead a class discussion on the activity. During this discussion, students can share their experiences and what they have learned. To wrap up the activity, Lucas suggests that consciousness should be discussed and explained as a vital part of developing communication competence. There are four stages to proficiency:

- 1) unconscious incompetence (the stage in which students were currently)
- 2) conscious incompetence
- 3) conscious competence
- 4) unconscious competence²¹

It is important for students to realize that there is a process to becoming better speakers and that these stages can act as a guide. Unconscious incompetence is a phase in which the speaker is not aware of their poor speaking habits. Before the assignment, most, if not all, students demonstrated unconscious incompetence with regard to their habits. Students are to transition to being aware of their bad habits, actively correcting these habits, and then finally to a point where the suppression of the habit is now second-nature. A common theme for a college education is that it does not only make you smarter, but also more aware. Awareness of common habits that effect a student on a daily conversational basis will allow them to remedy and become better speakers in general.

Learning Tasks

Providing learning tasks for students to engage in formal presentations can be a successful tool for continued development of oral presentation skills in students. Chan⁸ suggests that the use of PowerPoint-type presentations/seminars can be a tool used to develop better public speakers. Unlike other subjects, oral communication cannot simply be studied through reading from a book, but must be learned through hands-on experiences.

Students need to be provided with an authentic setting in which to plan, strategize, practice and assess effective oral communication⁸. To further define authentic settings, the student should feel as if they are engaging in activities that they may encounter in their career. If students feel that the activity has no bearing on future endeavors, they may feel as if the activity is shallow and short-sighted. It is up to the instructor to ensure that this atmosphere is created.

Given opportunities to present with the PowerPoint-type media, the students has the chance to develop the ability to plan, prepare, identify, extract, present, and communicate. Students need to be pushed to be precise and concise with their presentations. This learning task is more than just becoming familiar with a software package, but also using the visual aid in an effective manner. In addition, many academic institutions and companies are using programs like PowerPoint-type, so exposure will give them confidence. Providing a public performance can trigger a mechanism within the students that can cause them to take the assignment more seriously and activate a deeper understanding of the subject.

The suggested length of the presentation can vary depending on instructor, time, and topic. Short presentations provide more opportunities for the students to display a variety of topics and may fit better into current curricula. Longer presentations, will provide the students with a bigger need for preparation. Both have been deemed as effective practices.

Assessment is an important component of the learning task. All criteria for assessment should be made clear and available at the onset of the project, so students know what they are being graded on. The class can also brainstorm ideas of what aspects they should be assessed⁸.

Alternative forms of assessment should be considered as well. Students are more often than not assessed by only the immediate instructor. It is also important for students to be assessed by their peers, who usually are the presenter's audience. Setting up a proper climate for criticism from other students is significant, as biases and personal vendettas are to be avoided. In this situation where students are assessing each other, students may work differently to ensure acceptance from their peers. Additionally, students who are assessing other groups will learn from the observation and appraisal process. Listening and understanding were one of the important elements of communication mentioned earlier.

Self-assessment can be used as part of the grading process as well. With advances in video recording devices (i.e., cell phones) and software, students can easily record and upload videos for later viewing. Dr. XYZ, an engineering professor at AB University, uses a process of recording presentations and having students watch and review them individually as a part of the assessment process. The students are then required to critique their own presentation, detailing their strengths and weaknesses. This is an excellent practice, as students tend to overlook common mistakes made when presenting. To be able to look at oneself from an alternative perspective, allows for the student to get an idea about how an audience member might have

viewed the presentation. From this they can note changes they need to make in their delivery and execution.

Beyond providing chances for the students to present to their peers, the students also need repetition of the same presentations. The typical case is that students make a single presentation on a topic and never have the chance to reflect and revise their work. Students can make corrections to their presentations, noting places where they deviated from their point or where they should have rephrased a certain passage, but ultimately they never get the chance to incorporate these corrections in a second presentation. There is an important learning opportunity to be had through repetition. To make oral presentations better, students need to feel some success. Analyzing and revising a past presentation allows the students to correct their mistakes and gain confidence in their oral communication skills. Time is a common deterrent of this practice, but it is one that must be considered to improve presentation skills in students.

Pecha Kucha

Consider this: take the average college student and ask them to develop a presentation on any topic. Inform them that they are given two weeks to prepare for the presentation. In this time of technology, an overwhelming majority of students will come back in a fortnight with a PowerPoint-type presentation of some sort. According to Microsoft, 1.25 million PowerPoint-type presentations take place every hour²². Blame it on Microsoft's popularity or the lack of other established presentation software packages, but for whichever reason it is the go-to tool of the modern academic culture.

The problem with typical PowerPoint-type presentations given by students is that they often read straight from their slides, exceed the given time limit, and lose focus causing them to ramble. As a remedy to this Mark Dytham and Astrid Klein²³ developed a new PowerPoint-type presentation format called Pecha Kucha in 2003²⁴. Pecha Kucha is a Japanese term for chatter or chit-chat²³. The presentation method is based on 20 timed slides. No matter the content or topic, the presenter is limited to 20 slides. More importantly, each slide is on a 20 second timer and cannot be advanced manually by the presenter. Pecha Kucha forces the student presenting to edit their slides differently and adapt their delivery to the time limit²⁵.

Drs. Joan C. Masters and Beverly E. Holland applied this pecha kucha method in their classrooms by delivering the instructions in the same method. They mention that many of their students had trouble prioritizing content, but pecha kucha forced them to "aggressively manage" the material²³. The pace of the presentation required the students to rehearse their presentation countless times to adjust to the new format.

The first students exposed to this new method provided feedback to the professors. Students commented on the necessity of an ample amount of practice, preparation, and organization. Interestingly, one student made a remark from the perspective of an audience member, "You have to listen because you know they won't be repeating it"²³. Not only does this method improve oral communication skills of the presenters but also requires the audience to listen more intently.

Conclusion

Can students take what they have learned and apply it in the real world or even discuss with others what they have researched, discovered, or tested? Many students enroll in university programs across the country expecting to become well versed in scientific theory, artistic expression, and mathematical modeling, but an important skill may not be adequately addressed. The importance of oral presentation skills has never been more apparent than in the current economic climate. Companies are requiring more presentations by employees on a day-to-day basis. Corporations want to know where their invested money is going and it is the task of the employee to present administration with proper evidence. A portion of industry jobs are held by those who have attained an undergraduate degree and it is appropriate that these graduates have strong oral presentation skills. Multiple solutions to improving presentation skills are out there and a strong consideration should be taken to employ them when conditions are right. Providing students with the knowledge on oral presentations, shifting established speaking deficiencies, providing learning practices, as well as restructuring the common PowerPoint-type presentation with methods like Pecha Kucha, represent a handful of appropriate practices to be considered and developed.

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