

The Horror - Presentation without Power Point

Giving a talk without Power Point gives the speaker a far greater connection to the audience. The result is something closer to a conversation than a one sided lecture. From a university/educational point of view, it builds skills students will draw upon for the rest of their professional lives.

What's in it for me? – People (even many faculty) hate giving presentations without Power Point. It can be good to remember there is a grand plan. When talking to an audience you are sharing your enthusiasm for a subject, making connections, paving roads for future collaboration/funding, and potentially impressing a future employer. Short of publications, what other avenue does a student have to build a reputation? You want your audience to remember you not your fantastic Power Point featuring everything you said coupled with some great charts, graphs, and images filling every square inch. Another note: your audience can read faster than you can talk.

The point is to keep the audience focused on you.

How? 1) Prepare, 2) Practice, and 3) Engage

Prepare

- a) Why are you there?
 - a. What is the purpose/expectation of the talk?
 - b. Who is your audience?
- b) Outline – Create an obvious flow (avoid a treasure hunt)
 - a. What is the one unifying point?
 - b. Identify 3 – 4 supporting concepts
 - c. Remember 1) Tell them what you are going to tell them. 2) Tell them. 3) Tell them what you told them.
 - d. Your outline can be used to keep you on track. Focus on topics - not exact language
- c) “X” Marks the spot – Illustration
 - a. If necessary/beneficial select a few (no more than your 3 – 4 supporting concepts) to illustrate what you are talking about.
 - b. Refer to these in lieu of Power Point, consider providing them as handout

Practice

Give the talk numerous times for a variety of audiences. Ask these people to critique your presentation and to jot down areas needing work/clarification. Consider video taping yourself. It is unnerving to videotape yourself talking, to say the least. But, it provides good practice and shows how many times you said, “um” and every other presentation faux pas you didn't realize you did. It is painful but powerful; consider it a right of passage.

Engage

Think TED. When you give the talk, consider it a conversation. It is easy to be confident during a conversation. Bring that confidence to your talk. You are talking to an audience not at them. Make eye contact. Involve the audience if possible. Use humor if appropriate. Vary the tone of your voice to convey additional meaning. Avoid “um”. Enunciate. Project your voice and/or determine the right volume for the technology. For goodness sake, dress appropriately. You don't want your audience to remember you as the guy in paisley Bermuda shorts when the masses were in suits. Make sure buttons are buttoned and zippers are zipped.

How to build these skills

1) Give students course credit

Public speaking is a critical skill. It is hit upon often in our curriculum but is always viewed as secondary to the educational mission of the course. As a result, Nanoscience and Microsystems at The University of New Mexico opted to institutionalize the practice by offering a course generically called “Journal Club” to give students credit for these “soft skill.” This course fills every semester. Students attend from other departments/programs and some take the class more than one time. In this class they repeatedly do “journal reviews.” Students bring in a seminal refereed journal article in their area of research and explain why it is important and how it relates to the student’s research. Students are encouraged to critique the presentation skills and probe for clarification. This differs from their research group meetings because of the varied backgrounds of those in the class. In a group meeting everyone can be assumed to be as knowledgeable on the topic and often talks are updates rather than full pictures.

2) Outreach

Outreach educates people of all ages, builds a community inside the university as well as out and (most importantly) gives students a chance to explain complex science at a variety of levels. At every event students are asked what their research is about and their answers evolve to meet the venue. I also find that students come up with innovative methods to illustrate a concept that can later be used during talks. Consider describing surface area. You can show a video showing the side of a box and then exploding the box (all eyes on the power point) or you can bring play dough, ask an audience member to make a single big box. Then ask him/her to break it into little bits (all eyes on you). Both show the idea of increasing surface area but one is passive and the other comparatively is not. Outreach builds public speaking skills.

3) Research Day

Our students organize a research day allowing an opportunity to share their research with the other NSMS students and other attendees. This is valuable because students learn how to organize a complex event. The days is comprised of student presented talks and posters. Both give students a bevy of opportunities, with people from different backgrounds, to talk about their science and hone public speaking skills. It is judged with prizes given. We have developed a public speaking evaluation form which attendees complete and then shared with the student/advisor.

4) Science on Tap!

A seminar series for the public in a bar, created as a direct response to the 2011 Portland NISE Net Network Wide Meeting. This event represents the efforts of Heather Armstrong and Cheryl Brozena from UNM, Rachel Cutrufello and Jeanette Miller from the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History (NISE Net Network partners), and Cecilia Kido and Guillermo Loubriel owners of Cosmo Tapas Restaurant. This event has been wildly successful filling all seats and standing room each and every month. Speakers give a 30-minute talk, without Power Point, followed by 30 minutes of questions/discussion. We have featured students, faculty and area scientists. The location provides attendees the opportunity to see a “Power Point-less” in action. It also gives selected students and faculty a chance to further hone their skills. Minimal assessments, in exchange for a chance to win a door prize, are collected. Assessment slips also build mailing lists. This event has been maintained on a zero dollar budget. We are very proud.