Affective Factors Influencing Conference Presentation Performance

4

Abstract

In this chapter, we will briefly discuss some of the external factors that may affect conference performance. We will reexplore the triangulation of the persuasive, informative, entertainment dimensions in terms of static versus dynamic speech, contrasting the notion of 'reading a paper' with the broader concept of 'performing a presentation.' We will also discuss other affective factors such as the value of a CP versus that of a research paper publication and the presenter's external motives for participating in a conference.

4.1 Static Versus Dynamic English

It is usually quite evident that most novice academic conference speakers take great care to ensure both the veracity and quality of their presentation slides. But great slides are no substitute for lack of dynamics in the actual presentation. After all, slides by themselves do not constitute a presentation. Rather, it is the spoken text which accompanies, or better, actualizes, the slides that are at the center of what we mean by 'a presentation,' the slides primarily serving as a visual reference point to ground what the presenter is saying. This is why simply reading the text directly from one's slides has little or no impact upon the audience—it is not really a presentation but a matter of reading notes. Unfortunately, however, novice presenters do often render their CPs as verbatim readings of their publications—which is much the same as a writer confusing the process of writing with typing.

In order to make an impact upon the audience, the speaker has to expand and elaborate beyond the slide content (and I will offer numerous, detailed examples as to how to do this in Parts IV and V of this book). One of the main purposes of performing any type of CP should be to convey one's passion or interest in the

topic. If the presenter is simply reading notes—reporting as opposed to presenting —that passion more easily becomes muted—imagine, for example, a potential suitor reading a marriage proposal to a partner from a prepared text! Not surprisingly, there exists a fairly widespread belief that having a written text in front of the speaker indicates that he or she has not done their CP homework.

However, that being said, I have observed some conference speakers who literally 'read' their papers from prepared notes but still managed to be very effective presenters—usually due to any of three factors. These include some combination of (1) their existing status as high-profile researchers, (2) the importance/novelty of their content, and/or (3) the sonic qualities of their voice and/or dynamic intonation. However, unless the speaker is a particularly engaging orator with compelling content, explicitly expanding one's CP beyond the notion of 'reading a paper' serves as good basic advice.

Most of the conference presenters I observed were quite competent in terms of performing static English—oral set pieces, the type of prepared texts suited for public announcements—but struggled with more dynamic, open-ended speech events. So, the central question is, how might presenters be able to better manage these dynamic skills?

First, readers should know reading from prepared scripts or directly from the slides, judiciously carried out, *can* be effective. In several CPs that I observed, the summary of findings was read precisely as it was written on the slides. If any section is to be read verbatim, the summary is often the best choice, since it reinforces the 'take-home' points of a short FP/PS. In any section of text however, when key points were stated more deliberately, and/or repeated or reinforced through a combination of spoken and written modes, the rhetorical flow of the CP as a whole could be more easily absorbed by the audience. However, if slides are read verbatim, presumably for the purpose of emphasis or to highlight key summative points, the speaker should do so slowly. Paraphrasing the written slide texts can also be particularly helpful as a means of reinforcing the audience's attention on the most significant findings.

However, largely due to a lack of confidence regarding the dynamic aspects of English performance or simple stage fright, several novice and NNES presenters I observed seemed to willfully avoid those situations in which more dynamic skills might be demanded by simply reading their prepared hand notes. These presenters appeared to be (and on some occasions, actually admitted in interviews) that they had more interest in just getting through—merely completing—their presentation than actually conveying their important, interesting, or meticulously researched data or findings. Of course, this 'let's just get through it' mentality obviates the main point of presenting at an international conference in the first place—the real purpose of which should be to inspire and enlighten, as well as to transmit and receive both ideas and knowledge. Simply finishing a speech in order to gain a presentation 'credit' will not achieve that.

Through subsequent interviews with several academic presenters, I've been able to identify four likely causes behind this phenomenon. These constitute the following four sections.

4.2   The Concept of 'Reading a Paper' Versus Employing Persuasive Rhetoric

Academic presentations are often referred to in conference Web sites and pamphlets as 'papers,' most significantly in the fact that a potential presenter invariably submits a proposal through the 'call for papers' link. This may lead one to think that the conference is primarily a venue for verbalizing in report form what one has, or hopes to be, published. And this is not entirely inaccurate, particularly in the hard sciences. However, the difference between 'reading a paper' and 'presenting' is becoming increasingly significant, especially given that the notion of a conference as being a mere assembly at which you 'report' your published paper by 'announcing' it is gradually diminishing in favor of the idea of the conference as a multimodal, socially semiotic key event for the discourse community.

As I mentioned earlier, even the densest data-based research report presentation generally should contain or assume some persuasive value, which, as a result, places more emphasis on the interaction between speaker and audience. The speaker is expected to appeal to the audience as peers within the community, particularly in the current era when extremely elaborate presentation software tools are readily available and can be readily deployed even by non-experts. Thus, the need to employ interactive and/or interpersonal skills and to use the occasion to make one's research processes and findings appeal to the audience more effectively is now paramount. But, as long as some presenters think of the presentation as a case of merely 'reading a paper,' they will likely to be inclined to also think of the opportunity as little more than a mechanical verbalization of the published version, and thus it will likely lack persuasive value.

There is also a tendency for many young academics to initially treat CPs as 'reports' inasmuch as they are indeed conveying data and/or findings. However, the connotation of the term 'reporting' is also much narrower than that of a giving a presentation. 'Reports' tend to be delivered to insiders who are familiar with the background, the audience, and the surrounding texts. Reports tend to be narrowly located within an existing discourse (as with the company financial 'report' delivered during a meeting of the board of directors). Reports tend to focus solely on conveying data and, as such, tend to eschew any interpersonal element. And while there is unquestionably a 'reporting' element in a CP, this would normally constitute only a part of the whole presentation. If other elements of a CP are absent with only the 'reporting' function emphasized, the persuasive and entertainment dimensions will be lost.

4.3   Academia Viewed as 'Non-Entertainment'

The tendency toward thinking of CPs as persuasive forms of communication, designed to make an appeal to the listener, also demands that the speaker employs some elements of entertainment value. But in the rather conservative world of

academia, particularly in certain cultural milieus, the use of flashy whistles and bells may be more redolent of crass advertising and indulgent personal showmanship, rather than serious, sober scholarship.

Here is where TED presentations may serve as an effective counterexample. The scholarship underlying the more academic TED presentations is often at an extremely high level, but the presenters are also very aware of engaging their audiences and thus make great efforts to capture their attention. This need not imply gimmickry, but it does mean paying close attention to one's more visceral presentation skills. After all, if an idea is worthy of conveyance, then it should be conveyed with convincing enthusiasm.

I do not think this virtue can be entirely disconnected from those cultures which place a high value on service, cultures in which the customer is treated as king. After all, if we think of an audience as a type of customer, then we owe them our best presentation skills and energy, as a type of professional service. Presumably, the CP is being performed primarily for the audience's benefit, and not just so that the speaker than buttress their CVs or check off a requirement to appease their superiors.

I say this because many novice presenters whom I've met, and whose presentations I observed, admitted that they really did not choose to do the presentation themselves. They were either forced to by their superiors or professors, or they felt that it is a mandatory endeavor in order to pursue their professional and/or academic careers. It is often seen as a fulfillment of an obligation, or a rite of training passage, more than as an opportunity to enlighten and inform their peers.

Fostering enthusiasm for propagating your findings, or establishing a real wish or need to convey your results, ideally *should* be the underlying motive for presenting—not merely because the department head says, 'It's your turn.' I cannot help but wonder if those academics who actually look forward to giving CPs should not be given some extra work-related credits or rewards for their efforts—benefits which might positively inspire those who would otherwise not be inclined to present.

4.4 The Academic Database Value of Publications Versus Presentations

In many academic institutions, the weighted value of a presentation on one's academic record might be only a fraction of that of a publication (often regardless of any related impact factors). In fact, in most academic communities much more time and effort are usually put into producing publications (one might note how many books, research papers, and courses have been established to teach academic writing, as opposed to CPs). As a result, the presentation is usually treated only as an afterthought, an intermediary trial stage in the process of producing the RP.

But, as many conference presenters have begun to notice, an excellent presentation can make instant connections with prominent members of the audience, leading to fruitful future contacts and collaborations. It can spark an immediate

interest and follow-up dialogue in a way that publications often cannot or will not be able to. The visceral face-to-face setting that presentations provide can make interesting or important findings hard for the audience to ignore, whereas it is easy for readers to skip over pages in a journal. Having academic institutions add more database value or impact factor weighting to presentations could help foster a better 'presentation culture' among young academics. At the very least, an expanded recognition of the practical merits of performing high-quality CPs is called for.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 4

1. In what cases or under what limitations may it be acceptable to read directly off a CP slide or prepared hand notes?
2. What professional advantages might performing a CP have over publishing a paper?
3. What qualities distinguish CPs from 'reading a report'?
4. Which portions of a CP tend to demand dynamic, as opposed to static, forms of English?