

# Presentation skills for teachers

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Your success as a teacher is largely determined by your ability and skill in communicating your message. We have all experienced teachers who were clearly experts in their field but lacked the skills to convey their knowledge and understanding to a group of students. Presentation skills are integral elements of the complex craft of teaching.

## Framework for effective teaching practice

Technique (skills) + Style (individual expression) = Effective teaching practice

### Variety/variability

It is important to vary all aspects of your performance as a teacher. Reliance on any one part of your repertoire as a teacher may lead to monotony and loss of student interest. Research indicates that adult learners have attention spans of a maximum of 15 minutes. It is therefore worth building presentations around blocks of activities which take approximately this much time.

Consider variations in use of teaching strategies, voice, questioning techniques, feedback to students, assessment, instructional technology, space in the classroom etc.

### Audibility

- Students must be able to hear you. Have a rehearsal in the lecture theatre with a colleague at the back of the room to check your ability to project your voice. Projecting your voice is not merely a matter of yelling, it is a technique to 'throw' your voice to the back of the room to ensure that all can hear you. Remember you may have to increase volume when a lecture theatre is full, because a mass of student bodies tends to absorb the sound.
- Problems with audibility sometimes result from slurring or poor articulation of words. Aim to enunciate as clearly as possible.
- Aim for variety in volume that aids the sense of your message.
- Invite students to speak up if they can't hear you.

## Pace

- Monitor the basic pace or speed at which you speak - students cannot take notes or absorb information if you speak too quickly. Watch to see when they lift their heads from notetaking. They will quickly lose interest if you talk too slowly or too quickly.
- Be aware that nervousness causes many people to speak too quickly. If you feel the speed of your delivery increasing, pause for a moment and start again at a more even pace.
- Change the pace to suit the meaning of your sentence.

## Pitch

- Pitch is the musical quality in your voice that relates to the highness or lowness of your voice. Variability in pitch will add to the effectiveness of your presentation as long as it does not become monotonous or repetitious.
- Be aware that nervousness often results in extremes of pitch - many people adopt a very high pitch when they are anxious.
- Attempt to use upward inflection when sense is indefinite and downward inflection when the sense is finished.
- A change of pitch can be used to indicate the beginning of a new thought.
- Use inflection to support the meaning and for emphasis.

## Articulation/pronunciation

- Attempt to pronounce words correctly - proper sounds, emphasis and sequence.
- Form vowels and consonants that make up words, correctly.

## Emphasis

- Use emphasis in your voice to signal to students important concepts in your lecture.
- Changes in emphasis can assist to create more varied and interesting presentations.
- Use verbal markers to signal things of importance to students - “now this is important”; “this is a difficult idea to grasp”.

## Pause

- Pause to give students time to think about what you're saying and for you to check your notes or prepare for the next point. Students also need time to write adequate notes from your presentation, so ensure that you pause long enough to allow note-taking. Silence can also be used as an effective method of capturing student attention.
- Avoid what are called vocal pauses - "uhm", "you know", "like" etc. Your audience will be distracted by overuse of such words and sounds.

## Energy and enthusiasm

- Inject physical and mental energy into your presentation as a teacher. Students will find themselves caught up in the energy and enthusiasm you convey, not only for your subject matter but also for the opportunity to teach others about your area of specialisation. Your enthusiasm will be conveyed through your voice, gestures, and general commitment to what you are doing. It will also become evident through your choice of language - active rather than passive words tend to motivate students.

## Eye contact

- Maintain eye contact with your audience so that you can establish a relationship with them. Eye contact invites them to listen to you.
- Do not focus on one spot in the lecture theatre (e.g. the back wall); allow your eyes to roam the audience and look into individual students' eyes.
- If in a large lecture theatre, divide the audience into sections and then try to move your eyes from section to section throughout the lecture. This is useful as a management technique too - you need students to know that everyone in the room is being watched, particularly anyone not behaving appropriately.

## Gestures and movement

- Do not be afraid of using gesture and movement because nonverbal behaviours have a powerful impact in the classroom. Use them in a natural way to assist in conveying the meaning of your oral message.
- Use nonverbal communication to complement, not contradict, your verbal communication.
- Avoid gestures or mannerisms that are repetitive and likely to distract your audience from the substance of your lecture. Recall your own experience of lecturers who continually tossed chalk in the air or played with their glasses. Invite a colleague to sit in on one of your lectures to monitor any irritating habits you may have unknowingly adopted.

- Don't be afraid to move around the teaching space, so long as students can still hear what you are saying. However, do not pace nervously from one side of the room to the other. Use movement in a purposeful manner to enhance the presentation of your material, not to distract your audience.
- Keep your movements simple.
- Use facial expression to bring your presentation to life.
- Don't be afraid to smile - this can make the students feel more comfortable and may assist you in reducing nervousness.

## Stance

- Maintain good posture - stand tall.

## Confidence

- The value of appearing confident (even when you do not feel confident) cannot be overemphasised.

## Use of notes

- Some lecturers read their entire lecture, often without lifting their head to look at the audience. Remember that students can read and if all you are going to offer them is a reading of notes or a text, then they are better off doing that in their own time. Tear yourself away from notes - speak to points on overheads or points in your notes. If you must read something, look up occasionally during the reading.
- Keep in mind that spoken language is not the same as written language. It is therefore more appropriate to prepare notes or a skeleton for delivery in a lecture or presentation, than a long written piece that is more suitable for publication in an academic journal. Effective communication demands that you understand the nature of your audience and the context for delivery.

## Additional reading and resources

Cannon, R. (1988). Lecturing. HERDSA Green Guide Number 7. Sydney: HERDSA.

Dominick, J. (1991). Making effective presentations: Managing design and delivery. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 51. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

McCallion, M. (1988). The voice book. London: Faber and Faber.

McCarthy, P. & Hatcher, C. (1996). Speaking persuasively: Making the most of your presentations. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.