



Active Learning through Student Presentations

University students around the world give presentations to their classmates. There is a vast amount of advice to them on the internet about how to successfully prepare for this task. Sites give tips on everything from identifying a topic through to dazzling an audience with great delivery.

But are student presentations a good idea? Advocates say that presentations provide a vehicle for students to investigate a topic, either by themselves or in a group. Good presentation skills will help students as they progress through their studies and, after graduation, will be an asset to them as workers and citizens.

In theory, requiring students to orally present their work to their classmates sounds both manageable and worthwhile. But what is the experience of our students?

Patchy Experiences

Informal conversations with PolyU students show very mixed satisfaction about their experiences in classes where student presentations are expected. Some report they have learned a lot and enjoyed the experience.

When I do a presentation, I learn from my classmates. They raise a lot of questions that I never thought of. It is a very good way to learn.

It was good to be the class expert on the topic.

Knowing that I was going to have to teach all of the other students made me far more careful when I did the research.

Others paint a gloomier picture. Without tutelage about how to prepare and give a presentation they feel ill-prepared. Anxiety and disappointment with performance are common. Listening to classmates' presentations raises other concerns and questions. How trustworthy is the content of their presentations? It seems a waste of time listening to poor presentations, week after week. It can be very boring, too. Students often wonder if teachers are shirking their responsibilities by passing the teaching over to their students.

Others' presentations sometimes don't teach me anything because they are badly organised and presented.

Some presentations are overwhelming. Presenters need to learn what is important and what is not!

In student presentations, I don't know whether what I am being told is right or wrong. Why doesn't the teacher just teach us?

Pain to Gain

Incorporating student presentations into your courses demands a considerable amount of work for both you and your students.

In this issue we:

- Offer general advice about how to prepare students for their presentations.
- Describe activities that can be done in class to help hone students' presentation skills.
- Describe other teachers' experiences in getting the audience involved in and learning from presentations.
- Give some links to web resources that students can use when preparing presentations.

Developing students' skills and confidence is important if we want them to stand up and speak out when they are required to do so.



Making the Most of Presentations for All Students

Q Last academic year, for the first time, I required students in my third-year class to give an oral presentation about their project work. The standard was dismal. Do you have any advice so I don't have the same problems this year?

A My early experiences of getting students to give presentations – whether they were first year or research students – was that they lacked both confidence and skills. Since then I have adopted a number of practices which have resulted in better presentations and better learning. Dependent on the situation, some of the things I do are:

Find out students' fears

Different groups have different concerns but they generally fall into three categories. There are the preparation concerns which include selecting content and structuring. There are anxieties about managing themselves and their audience during the presentation. Speaking in English to their classmates can be another major concern. Knowing what worries my students helps me decide on what pre-presentation preparation would best suit them.

Discuss the intended learning outcomes

I never assume my students will understand the purpose of presentations. At the outset, we discuss what they will learn by giving a presentation. I also provide accounts from past students which demonstrate that good presentation skills can help them get and keep a job.

Make your expectations clear and maintain standards

I stress to the students that they have a responsibility to their classmates to make their presentation as good as they can. Presenters know that I expect them to actively involve their audience. They also know that they must not regurgitate what is in their textbook. I maintain standards by scheduling a meeting with each person (or each group if it is a group project) at least one week ahead of their presentation. I check their plan and the quality of their resources.

Take care with assessment issues

To demonstrate the importance of the task, I assign a worthwhile percentage of the final mark to the presentation. The assessment rubric is contained in the assignment brief so that, from the outset, students know how they will be assessed. I include self- and peer-assessment which provides another learning opportunity alongside the feedback and coaching I provide. Recently I have been asking presentation teams to design a quiz to follow their presentation. This helps ensure that classmates pay attention as their quiz results contribute to their final grade.

Provide training

I don't throw students in at the "deep-end". Having said that, I don't think there is a set recipe for training them. What I do depends on different factors including what the students identify as their needs, the size and level of the class, and the intended learning outcomes

Make your role explicit to the students

At the outset, I explain to the class that my role is to support their learning. I explain that I may judiciously interrupt them during their presentation if a point needs clarifying. This allows me to engage when there is an omission or error, ask questions, or supply an example from my own experience if it will help. When students know this in advance they don't worry when I do so.

Stress the importance of being a good audience

I explore with the class, quite explicitly, what it means to be a good audience. We talk about behaviour that helps their classmates, such as active listening, friendly facial expressions, and asking and answering questions.

The students' presentations get better as I get better at managing the process.

Making Group Presentations Work

Group presentations provide opportunities to do much more than a single presenter might be able to do. But they can also be problematic as there is the double challenge for students of presenting to their classmates and working as a team. While **Presentation Skills Checklists** such as those you can find in the **Online Student Resources** on page 4 are relevant to both individual and group presentations, there are some extra points for groups to consider:

Reminders for Groups



1. A group presentation is ONE presentation, not a series of presentations. Co-ordination is critical.
2. Utilise the strengths, skills, and style of each team member, e.g.,
 - The most dynamic presenter might introduce and close the presentation.
 - The quickest thinker might be assigned the lead in handling questions.
 - The most creative team member might prepare the PowerPoint and handouts.
3. Practise, Practise, Practise. The more people involved, the more there is to control. A complete run through of the entire presentation enables a team to check timing, the flow, and the equipment. Team members can give each other feedback before others do!

Developing Students' Presentation Skills

Students are unlikely to learn oral presentation skills by being told what to do. In any training you provide for them, it is important to involve them in activities which require them to think, observe, analyse, apply, question, practise, give and receive feedback and more. Here are some suggestions:



Fears in the Box

What? Students share what makes them anxious about making a presentation.

Why? Students can see that worries are common and teachers can identify where students most need preparation.

How?

1. Students anonymously write onto a Post-It note their biggest public-speaking fear and post it in a designated place.
2. The teacher groups the fears and explores with the class what might be done to address the most common concerns.

How? (a smaller-class alternative)

1. Students each write down their fear onto a cue-card which they put in a box.
2. The cards are shuffled and passed out one per person. Students take turns at reading aloud the card they have received and offer suggestions for overcoming that fear. In doing this, they are also giving a mini-presentation. Suggestions are not evaluated.
3. Once all fears have been read and suggestions made, the whole class discusses the most common fears and what to do about them.



Pick & Speak

What? Students give one-minute presentations on a surprise topic.

Why? Students can test out (and get feedback about) their presentation skills before making an important presentation.

How?

1. The teacher writes presentation topics (subject-related or about presentation skills) onto cue cards and puts them into an envelope.
2. The first "lucky" student randomly draws a card from the envelope and has one minute to prepare a one-minute talk. Cards are not put back into the envelope.
3. While the first student presents, the next chosen student picks a card and prepares. This sequence is repeated until all students, or a pre-determined number of them, have presented.

Pause briefly between presentations to give feedback. The teacher and a different student each time tells the presenter, "One thing I liked..." and "One suggestion I have..."



Sharp Focus

What? Students watch presentations via video and consider how they work and how they don't.

Why? Students have the opportunity to think explicitly about what makes a good presentation.

How?

1. Divide students into teams. Give each team a question, e.g.:
 - How did the speaker attract the audience's attention?
 - What did you notice about the presenter's body language?
 - What did the presenter do to help you follow what she was saying?
 - What did you notice about the presenter's use of voice?
 - Overall, what did you like about this presentation?
 - How might the presentation be improved?
2. Show the class a video of a presentation or speech.
3. At the end of the video give the teams a few minutes to discuss their question.
4. A member from each team presents a summary of their observations.
5. Drawing on the observations, the class draws up a list of "hot tips for presentations".

Obtaining speech clips

- Check the library for resources.
- Co-opt the help of students to make your own video.
- Mine the Internet or set the students homework to find good clips. Places to look include:

The History Channel <http://www.history.com/>

American Rhetoric <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/>

YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/>

Adapted from:

Silberman, Mel. (1996). *Active learning: 101 strategies to teach any subject*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. (Call number: LB1027.23.s556 1996)



Join SAP

PolyU's ELC's Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL) provides a service to help your students develop their speaking skills. Refer them to the **Speaking Assistance Programme (SAP)**:

<http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/SAP/>

The Active Audience

As well as thinking about the learning that comes and the skills that must be developed to give a good presentation, it is also important to think about the audience – their behaviour and their learning. Students will learn more if they are a good audience, and it makes presenting a lot easier for the presenter. Here is an activity and some approaches you may wish to consider:

Brainstorm

What? A class brainstorm to identify appropriate behaviour during classmates' presentations.



Why? Alert students to the importance of being a good audience and supporting their classmates (and in return get support from them).

How? Brainstorm rules apply, e.g., All ideas are welcome; No discussion, clarification or questions until all ideas are listed.

Peer Review

Bryan Zeitler, as a Graduate Student in Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of Berkeley, California required students to participate in an incentive-based, anonymous peer review of their classmates' presentations. This is how it worked:

1. Each audience member was provided with a half-sheet of paper with instructions to write:
 - A short summary of the presentation.
 - One interesting thing they learned.
 - One or two questions that arose.
 - One or two things that were good or needed improvement.
2. After the presentation, volunteers were called for to summarise their comments on one of the four sections and these comments received a worthwhile percentage of their presentation grade.

3. The papers, with the names of the students ripped off, were given to the presenter(s).

Zeitler found it useful to compare his view of the presentations with his students' views. He also found that more questions were asked and that the quality of presentations improved throughout the semester.

http://gsi.berkeley.edu/textonly/awards/02_03/zeitler.html

Rewards for Questions

Richard Stead of Leeds Metropolitan University found that when he introduced student presentations into his International Business MA classes, attendance dropped and students showed no sign of learning. To address this, he introduced two innovations:

1. He required students to work in teams and create questions for the presenting team. The questions were handed in, graded, and then asked to the presenting team in the next class.
2. He kept a record of attendance. Students' total marks came from their presentations, the questions they wrote and their attendance. Attendance improved significantly and students wrote good questions, although they did become formulaic after several weeks – a challenge to be met.

http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/stead_presentations.htm

Online Student Resources

The sites listed below (just a few of the many that have been written) may be useful to use in skill-building workshops when students might work together on constructing a "**Presentation Skills Checklist**". Alternatively, you might refer students to these sites as part of an independent learning exercise. The writing is student-friendly and each contains useful advice.

The **University of Canberra** provides a useful overview of things for students to consider from *preparation through to presentation*. <http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/learning/oral>

The **University of Surrey** provides a useful package for students who are *preparing a presentation*. The contents will be useful to students who find it difficult to focus on the presentation and spend too much time deciding how to proceed. <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Skills/pack/pres.html>

Facilitate Ltd poses a challenging *checklist of questions* for professionals who are required to give presentations as well as a list of characteristics that make a presentation either good or bad. This list will be useful to your students both now and when they enter the workplace. <http://www.facilitate-uk.com/pdf/PresentationSkillsChecklistUSApril2005.pdf>

The Impact Factory will be particularly useful to those students who suffer from *public speaking anxiety and nerves*. The *Hints and Tips* section offers some advice about how to make a presentation interesting. http://www.impactfactory.com/gate/public_speaking_training_course/freerate_1552-1104-88327.html

Read "Activate" Issue 10 online at:
<http://edc.polyu.edu.hk/Activate/10.pdf>

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Further Information

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